



Loving Her

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Description: Ruby Fierelli is a bestselling romance author with a serious case of writer's block and a looming deadline. But when her brother's wedding invitation arrives, it reminds her of something more pressing—being the last single sibling in a big Italian family is a fate worse than creative burnout.

To avoid the pity looks and awkward questions, Ruby hatches a plan: she'll bring her longtime friend, Sasha, as her pretend girlfriend. The only problem? Sasha has been secretly in love with Ruby for years. Will pretending to date Sasha blur the lines between friendship and love? Or will they both end up with broken hearts?

Total Pages (Source): 36

CHAPTER 1

As the rain poured down over the Kinloch estate, Nicola took a deep breath and gazed at Declan. She pushed the heavy wet chestnut rope of her braided hair back over her shoulder and felt it slap against the back of her dressing gown. It was so cold, so wet, but she needed to hear him speak. “Declan, you can’t be here.”

“Lass, ye canna stop me,” came the answering rumble, and he stepped forward, chin high. His black curls were plastered down over his forehead, giving him a menacing look that belied the love and desire she could see in his dark eyes. Nicola stepped back and took another deep breath, and immediately realized her mistake. Her dressing gown and night dress were so thin and so wet, and it was so, so cold. As her nipples sprang to pointed life, Declan’s gaze moved right to them, and fire raced down through Nicola’s stomach and down to her most private areas...

“Ugh, I hate writing straight people romance.” Blowing back her blunt, fire-engine red bangs, Ruby Fierelli groaned and pushed herself back from her desk. Her back was killing her after a full day in her writing chair. Resting her palms on the white-painted top of the desk, she braced her feet on the floor and bent forward, keeping her butt firmly in the desk chair. Her whole spine popped like Rice Krispies as she stretched out, making her groan with pleasure.

Under her desk, Ruby’s ten year old Scottie, Winston, uncurled himself from his Burberry-plaid bed and stepped over to nudge at her arm. “Hey, buddy, my Win-Win, baby boy,” Ruby cooed, cupping his head in her hands. With a grunt, she leaned

down further to give him a big smooch on his smooth, black-furred brow, and her back popped again.

A tap on her bedroom doorframe made Ruby peek out from under her arm, hands still busy scratching Winston's cheeks. Her roommate, Natalie, grinned at her with a twinkle in her green eyes as she leaned on the door, arms crossed over her Indigo Lounge t-shirt. One of her hands was full of envelopes and circulars and the other with a green smoothie in a clear plastic cup. "If I didn't know you better, I'd swear I was walking in on something inappropriate." She walked in, set the smoothie on the desk and tossed the mail down on Ruby's bed, then dropped down to sit on the secondhand quilt folded neatly at the end. Winston trotted up the steps by the bed and curled up next to Natalie. "I'd have questions."

"Well, yeah. I would too. Starting with, 'Hey, who are you?'" Ruby sat up and spun around in her desk chair. "How was work?"

"Busy as always. Things are really booming since the remodel. Esme finally agreed to hire a third barista, thankGod." Natalie kicked off her battered sneakers with a sigh and pulled her curly brown hair down from the tight bun she kept it in for work. She rubbed at her scalp for a moment before turning her attention to Winston, but she gave Ruby a sly sidelong glance. "You were missed today, again. Everyone's starting to forget what you look like."

"I can't focus on 1730's Scotland when I'm surrounded by the shiny modern world." Ruby waved back at her laptop. "Plus I don't want anyone coming up and finding me writing about straight people getting freaky."

"And how are Nicky and Dec?" Nat stood up and leaned over to peer at the open Word doc. "Ooh, nipples. They're making progress."

"Yeah, but I needed a breather before I had to write about him scooping her heaving

breasts out of her nightgown with his big man hands.” Ruby shuddered. Then she saw the green smoothie again. “Hey, is this for me?”

“Yah, Sasha sent me home with it. She thought you probably hadn’t eaten all day.” Nat cocked an eyebrow. “She’s right, isn’t she?”

Ruby paused halfway through sucking the smoothie down, feeling her cheeks start to burn pink. “Maaaaaybe.”

“Rubes, you need fuel for your big beautiful brain. I’m ordering us a pizza and then you can let me read what you wrote today.” Natalie straightened up and picked up the mail from the bed, giving Winston one last head scratch. “And here’s your mail. You must have really gotten into whatever you wrote because you didn’t eat or check the mail. I can’t wait to read it; it’s gonna be so good.”

“I still think it’s really weird that a lesbian who’s never even kissed a man is so into Highlander romances!” Ruby called after Natalie as she disappeared down the hallway of their shared apartment. She didn’t mean that, of course. She was grateful for all of her readers.

Sipping on the last of the green smoothie, she flipped through the stack of mail. Junk, junk, junk, credit card bill, address labels from a charity wanting money, junk, more junk... hello, what’s this?

Her fingers had stumbled over a thick, heavy envelope made of cream-colored paper that felt expensive. Her name was inked on the front in swirling black calligraphy that also struck her as expensive. Ruby flipped the envelope over to read the sending address engraved into the back flap, and let out a squeal as what she was seeing sank in.

“Finally!” She tore into the envelope and pulled out a heavy card embellished with

ornate golden filigree curves and flowers. Dr. and Mrs. Anthony Pausini gladly request your presence at the wedding of their daughter Angela Maria Theresa to Daniel James Fierelli...

Ruby's baby brother Daniel had been dating Angela Pausini since they were in college together and met at a frat mixer. In the seven years since, they'd resolutely resisted the urging of both their families to settle down and get married. They wanted to travel a little first, they'd said, and get jobs in their respective career fields. Then, and only when they both agreed the time was right, then they would start wedding planning.

Ruby had supported them firmly in this, one of the only family members they'd had at their backs. She believed with all her romantic heart that they were perfectly suited, and she wanted them to have a big, gorgeous wedding as much as anyone else did. But as a romance author, she also knew perfectly well that you couldn't always get your main characters to do exactly what you wanted at all times. And she loved her baby brother and his beloved Angela, so she stood with them and waited—as far as they knew—patiently.

Here was her reward. The grand day come at last. Ruby beamed at the invitation in her hands. Then a small slip of notepaper slid off the back of it and fluttered to the floor. Curious, Ruby bent down and picked it up.

Hey Sis! Look what we're doing! Hope you can find time to come and be my Best Gal. Miss you. -D.

The squeal Ruby let out brought Natalie racing back to the room. "What's going on? What happened? Are you okay?"

"My little brother's getting married and he wants me to be his Best Gaaaaaaaal!" Ruby jumped to her feet, throwing the invitation, envelope, RSVP card, and note into

the air like confetti. She grabbed Natalie's hands and dragged her into a dance around the room, Natalie laughing helplessly at Ruby's unhinged delight. Even Winston joined in, scampering down from the bed to hop and bark at their feet. Happy beyond belief, Ruby sang a rousing chorus of Chapel of Love before she gleefully fell back into her chair.

Equally breathless, Natalie flopped back onto the end of Ruby's bed. "The pizza'll be here in thirty minutes. Mushroom onion, thin crust, mozzarella di bufala as usual?"

"Got you trained well, I have." Ruby used the hem of her oversized, thrifted Bikini Kill t-shirt to dab sweat off of her face and forehead. "Thank you for that, I'll Venmo you. And send you the manuscript. Got some good stuff written today, a whole duel and everything. Death, blood, heaving bosoms, the whole nine."

Natalie's eyes twinkled. "I love it. This one's already my new favorite of yours from what I've read so far. But I want to hear more about this." She bent down and plucked the pieces of the wedding invitation up from the threadbare rug on the floor. "Long time coming?"

"Not the longest, but definitely very anticipated by a whole lot of people. It's going to be the social event of the year for Lindenwood Avenue." Ruby grinned.

Peering over the top of the invitation, Natalie quirked up an eyebrow. "That so? You're going to have to find a really great date, then."

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“Hm?” Ruby frowned. Date? I don’t need a date.

“Someone’s circled the “Plus One” field on the RSVP card in bright purple ink. And put little smiley face stickers around it.” Natalie waved the card in the air. “I think there are some expectations here.”

Ruby snatched the card out of her roommate’s hand and stared at it. Sure enough, there were quite a few purple loops scrawled around the Plus One, and yes, stickers too. Her frown deepened. “I don’t understand... oh.” As the realization hit her, dread spread out from the pit of her stomach like a wave of crude oil. “Oh, no.”

Natalie looked at her, both eyebrows up now and curiosity all over her face. “What? Oh no what?”

“I’m it. I’m the last.” Ruby thought back to all the weddings. Her oldest sister Rose. Then her older twin brothers, Domenic and Dante. Her Aunt Cecelia’s kids, all six, from Philip to Allegra to Isabella to Nico to Leo to Vincent. Uncle Leo’s brood, too—Anthony and Paul, only nine months apart in age, had actually come to blows over their weddings that had been in the same month just last year. And now Daniel, the baby of the whole lot, was getting married. All of the Fierelli kids in her generation—Ruby didn’t even want to factor her mother’s side of the family into the equation—were now married.

Except for her. She was it. The last single Fierelli. And someone clearly thought it was time for her to begin thinking about remedying that situation. Or at least to look like she was.

“Rubes?” Natalie waved a hand in front of her face. “Earth to Ruby. You still with me?”

“Whether I like it or not.” Ruby shook her head. “I’d kind of like the Earth to open up and swallow me whole so I can get out of this right about now, though.”

“That’s crazy, you were so excited literally two minutes ago!” Natalie stared at her. “What the hell? And what do you mean, you’re the last?”

“Nat, I’m the last one. The last single Fierelli. All of my siblings and cousins have married themselves off over the last ten years. I am it. At 35. Single, writer, dog mom. And I’m about to have to attend the biggest wedding we’ve had yet, to be in the loving bosom of my Italian American family, with the expectation that I bring a date. For an entire week.”

“Oooh.” Natalie’s eyes went Betty Boop-round. “Are they expecting a male date?”

“No, thank God. Clouds, lining, etc. They are very aware that any date I bring will be of the lady persuasion.” Ruby rubbed at her temples. A real bitch of a headache was starting to set in. “It’s just going to be so much pressure, you know? They’ll mean well, they want me to be happy the way they’re happy. We’re all a bunch of romantics at heart, we love love.”

“It sounds sweet,” Natalie said, a hint of wistfulness in her eyes. Ruby knew she’d grown up in a family that was supportive, but not overly affectionate. She chose her next words with more care.

“It is. It’s just... a lot. And whoever comes with me is in for it, too.” Ruby looked at the invitation again. “I have two months to find a date—and I definitely have to find a date—and prepare them for the experience that is a Fierelli Lovefest. With added Are You The One For Our Little Girl? spice. I don’t know who could be up for that.”

“It’s tempting to volunteer, from a like, social anthropology standpoint.” Natalie stood up and grinned. “Very tempting. Let me know if you don’t find anyone else. I’m great under pressure, as your roommate I’ve got loads of insider information, and last week I thrifted an amazing vintage Azzadine Alaïa that needs an occasion. I can fill in, in a pinch.” Just then, their doorbell chimed through the apartment. “Pizza’s here. Come set the coffee table, we’ll watch Law & Order. You deserve a break.”

“Roger that.” Ruby got up and reached up towards her ceiling for one more big stretch. The break was definitely deserved, she thought. She’d just experienced a whirlwind of emotions in a handful of minutes after a long and solid day of writing. And she had a long road ahead of her getting ready for Daniel and Angela’s wedding.

But that, Ruby reflected as she walked out of her room and beckoned for Winston to follow her, was a problem for Future Ruby. Tonight, pizza and crime drama called her name.

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CHAPTER 2

“Eighty six, the Truffled Halloumi Fries,” Sasha Ashford called out to the kitchen staff as she threw the packaging from her last packet of halloumi cheese into the plastic recycling. “Okay, so those are definitely a hit.”

Sous-chef Sophie looked up from where she was plating the last serving of the fries on a bed of baby butter lettuce leaves, with a cup of Sasha’s homemade peppercorn ranch dressing tucked in next to them. “So they’ll go on the menu full-time?”

Sasha pressed her hands against the base of her spine and stretched backward. “Probably. I’m gonna wait a couple of weeks before I put in for another shipment of halloumi, to see what kind of buzz not having them generates after they sold out the

whole month of this experiment. I want to make sure there's a good chance they'll keep selling."

Rebecca, the dessert specialist, drifted by with a Mexican Hot Chocolate pie in her hands. "Esme loves them, too."

"Yeah, that plate is for her; she's why we're out of them today!" Sasha laughed as she pulled down the next ticket. "They've replaced the loaded nachos as her favorite... hmm." She paused for thought, the ticket dangling forgotten from her hand. "Do loaded nacho halloumi fries sound good?"

Everyone in the kitchen at the Indigo Lounge stopped to think about the suggestion. "Yes," Rebecca said with a definitive nod of her head. "Yes. Absolutely. Yes. And don't make us wait two weeks for a taste test, Sash."

"Seconded," Sophie volunteered. "But they should be special, seasonal, limited. Maybe for next month as a sort of Cinco de Mayo thing? Even though halloumi isn't Mexican..."

"Still, that sounds like a plan to me. I like it. OK, I'll put in a small order of halloumi so we can do some thorough taste testing." Beaming at her amazing kitchen staff, Sasha looked back down at the ticket in her hand. It took her a moment to realize what she was looking at, and when she did, a flock of butterflies took flight in her stomach. "I got this one."

It was a simple order, just a basket of peppered sweet potato chips with hot honey glaze, but only one person ever ordered them, or knew that it was possible to order sweet potato chips at the Indigo Lounge at all. Sasha hummed Sarah McLachlan's "Ice Cream" to herself as she carefully sliced a sweet potato with a mandoline. Gently, she lowered the thin chips into a fresh hot oil bath, keeping a careful eye on them so that they came out perfectly crisp. She blotted all of the excess oil off with a

clean paper towel before sprinkling a generous helping of smoky Urfa Biber pepper over the chips, then a handful of feta crumbles, followed by a drizzle of her special hot honey glaze. This went under the broiler to get the cheese a little melty and toasty over the chips.

Working quickly, Sasha also mixed up a big mango-passionfruit milkshake, even though it wasn't on the ticket and Rebecca usually handled the milkshakes as part of her dessert duties. She filled a stemmed milkshake glass with the creamy concoction and sprayed a small mountain of whipped cream ontop, dusted that with fruity sprinkles, and placed a maraschino cherry with laser precision.

Only when everything was perfect did she load up a tray and personally convey the order out to the bar herself, bypassing Cam Casey waiting at the kitchen window. Cam, a jack-of-all-trades at the Lounge who was picking up a wait shift today, raised one knowing eyebrow and nodded.

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Sasha's target was at the corner of the Lounge's bar as usual, engaged in animated conversation with Esme Bloom, the owner of the café-bar. Butterflies took flight again as she walked briskly but with care for her special delivery towards Ruby Fierelli.

She looked fantastic, as usual—although maybe a little more tired than usual, Sasha observed. Clearly whatever she'd been working on during the week she was away from the Lounge had been a challenge. Her long, fiery red hair was pulled up in a high sloppy bun, and her blunt bangs, usually neatly arranged over her forehead, were all over the place. While Ruby usually wore funky crop tops, miniskirts, and tall socks with boots, today her lovely curves were hidden under a loose t-shirt and baggy jeans. And her ever-present laptop was nowhere in sight, nor the pin and patch covered messenger bag she usually carried it in. Sasha stopped and frowned. Something must have happened. She hoped Ruby was okay.

Ruby looked up from her conversation and her face lit up with a luminous smile when she saw Sasha. "Sash!"

Sasha's heart skipped a beat. Ruby's blue eyes were tired behind the thick rims of her black cat-eye glasses, but her happiness at seeing Sasha would be obvious even to the most emotionally stunted human being. It washed through Sasha like sunshine and got her moving again with Ruby's order. She set it down on the bar with care. "Hi, Rubes. Long time no see."

"Oh, just a week." Ruby's smile broadened. "I had alotof work to do on my latest project. I needed to be more distraction-free than usual."

“Ah, that’s why you didn’t send me any responses beyond thumbs-up or thumbs-down emojis.” Esme’s big brown eyes twinkled with good cheer. “I didn’t take it personally.”

“Good, because I didn’t mean it personally.” Ruby stuck her tongue out and winked. “I just allotted myself specific windows of time to access my phone during the day, and I had to work fast to respond to everyone’s texts. As soon as I got the urge to open TikTok or Instagram, I had to put the phone down and get back to work!”

“A solid strategy. But does this mean we can set up another book signing for you soon?” Esme looked eager. Ever since the Indigo Lounge had been renovated and expanded, Sasha knew her boss was just itching to host a big sapphic author event. They hadn’t had one since before the refurbishing, and Ruby’s signings always did well.

But Ruby looked sheepish, almost squirming in her chair in the face of Esme’s excitement. “Sorry, Esme. This one’s not a me project, it’s a ghosty. Someone else’s name and Photoshopped pic is going on the back. And,” she ducked her head and blushed. “This one’s for thestraights.”

Esme threw back her head and her delightful throaty belly laugh pealed out into the air of the Lounge. “It’s another Men in Kilts one, isn’t it? I knew you’d get picked up for more of those. How are you so good at writing burly straight men in wool skirts?”

Sasha had to suppress her own laugh as Ruby dropped her head into her hands in mock despair. “I don’t knooooow,” came the muffled groan. When she looked helplessly up at the Lounge ceiling, her bangs were spiked up into adorable disarray. “Ididn’t even grow up reading that kind of bodice ripper like Nat did.”

“Hey, that’s supposed to be my dirty little secret,” Natalie protested, catching the stray as she walked by with a tray of cappuccinos.

“We’ve all seen the ones you carry around in your purse, Nat,” Sasha chuckled. “You’re lousy at keeping your own secrets.”

As Nat sailed off in a huff to deliver her caffeinated burden, Ruby started nibbling at her snack. “Mmm. These are perfect as always, Sasha. You should put them on the regular menu.”

“Nah. Then they’re not special.” Sasha ignored the knowing grin on Esme’s face. Every week, Sasha put in the grocery order and every week it included five, and only five, sweet potatoes, destined for a customer who never had to pay for them to be made for her. Sasha was certain Esme knew about her crush on Ruby, and she was grateful for a boss that never made a fuss.

Ruby noticed the slightly melted milkshake at last and reached over from her tall barstool to give Sasha a hug that made the butterflies in her stomach swirl. “And a milkshake! Sash, you spoil me too much. I got the smoothie the other night, too. Thank you.”

“Nah, no problem.” The delicious scent of the perfume Ruby always wore wreathed around Sasha, filling her nose with notes of jasmine, rose, and some hint of pepper that added a bit of edge to the heady florals. “You deserve a reward after all your work. I figured that’s why you hadn’t been in.”

“And I’m not even done.” Ruby sat back up and resumed working on her chips. “I’m close,so closeto a story breakthrough that I can taste it. But I had to get out of the house and go somewhere other than the dog park. I neededpeople.”

“I’m people,” Nat protested, catching another stray as she passed innocently by with her now-empty tray.

“I love you, Nat,” Ruby called after her roommate. She grinned at Esme and Sasha.

“She’s been a treasure this week. Took Winston out for walkies, got us food, made me take breaks. Best roommate ever.”

Sasha slipped behind the bar to stand next to Esme. She started cutting up lemons to give her hands something to do, and to have an excuse to stay and keep talking to Ruby. “You know, if you want, I can take Winston for a few days so you don’t have to worry about him at all while you wrap up this project.” She liked Ruby’s little old man of a dog, a sweet fellow that slept most of the time but enjoyed a good game of fetch at the quieter dog parks of Los Angeles. Unfortunately caring for him, as she often did when Ruby went out of town, meant that she had to take Claritin every day without fail or risk sneezing her head off. Sasha wouldn’t do it for any other person or any other dog.

Ruby considered the offer. “No, not that,” she said, propping her chin in the palm of her hand. “I like the excuse to get up from my desk. But listen, I might need you in a couple months, actually.” She reached into a little army-green canvas purse sitting on the bar and fished out a white envelope. “My little brother sent me this.”

Esme plucked the envelope away and opened it, squealing as she pulled out a wedding invitation. Sasha peered over her shoulder and squinted to read the curling text. As she realized what it said, she couldn’t help her smile. “Danny and Ange are getting married?”

Ruby’s little brother and his college sweetheart had visited LA many times, and of course Ruby had brought them to her favorite hangout. They were good kids, or, well, not kids, she reflected. They were both about thirty, Danny having been a surprise baby five years after Ruby, Sasha remembered her saying once.

Ruby was beaming, her joy evident and nearly tangible. “Isn’t it awesome? I’m so happy for them. They stood so firm on their own timeline and their own needs. Not easy in our families.” She pointed to a thin little slip of paper in Esme’s hand. “And

look, Danny wants me to be his Best Gal. I know that caused at least two arguments with Angela's side of the family. Tradition runs strong in the Pausinis."

"Good on Danny for standing strong," Esme remarked with a nod of approval. "He's a good egg. But what's going on here?" She waved a little card. "Someone wants you to bring a date to this wedding real damn bad."

Sasha looked more closely at what turned out to be an RSVP card. To her surprise, the little Plus One question field was circled in purple ink and surrounded by tiny, glittery smiley face stickers. She blinked and looked at Ruby. "Wow. Kinda pushy of them."

The joy had evaporated from Ruby's pretty face, the light dimming in her blue eyes. "Yeah. They mean well, but... ugh." She pulled off her glasses and rubbed at the bridge of her nose for a moment. "I don't know what I'm going to do. It was going to suck going as the last single Fierelli already, but now I have to bring a date? And subject them to my family who'd love nothing more than to marry me off next? I don't know anyone I could willingly put through that."

Cam strolled up to mix a spicy Delevingne Daiquiri for a customer, shaking back the long purple side fringe of hair that drooped over her mischievous dark eyes. "You should take Sasha."

It took everything Sasha had in her to not kick her friend in the shin. Cam was the one person that Sasha had ever confessed her crush on Ruby to, and the crack she'd just made felt uncharacteristically unkind of her. Willing her anger to stay down, Sasha frowned at Cam. "Me? Why me?"

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“You’re like, stoic, Sash. You could withstand any pressure, and anyway, you know the family, right?” Cam’s eyes sparkled, but Sasha couldn’t really get a read on her. What was she up to? Her next words did nothing to settle Sasha down. “You and Ruby are really good friends. You could actually fake being girlfriends super well, plus you kinda do look like a couple.”

“I do know the Fierelli family,” Sasha replied slowly, ignoring the latter half of Cam’s outrageous suggestion. She was afraid to look at Ruby. Would she laugh off the idea? Dismiss it with some witty comment? Swallowing hard, Sasha tucked a curl of her black hair that had escaped her bandana back into confinement and forced herself to meet Ruby’s gaze.

But surprisingly, Ruby looked thoughtful, like she was actually contemplating the idea. “That’s... not a bad idea. Straight out of my second book, actually, and I’m furious I didn’t think of it first. It could work... if Sash is up to it, anyway.” Her eyes lit up again. “Nat suggested I take her, but it would be pretty clear pretty fast that we’re just friends, and I’d be in for a world of even more nagging then. My family wants me to bring adate, apossibility. Not just a friend.”

“You and I are just friends,” Sasha managed to get out, but she could hear the words emerging in a choked gurgle. Dimly, she was aware that Esme had taken her hand in a reassuring grip. That helped her a little.

“We can fake more, though.” Ruby was in full imagination mode, her glasses now propped up on her head as she thought out loud. “We’ve been friends for so long, and you do know my family, they like you a lot. They’re going to be really crazy all that week, though. Hopped up on love and romance and matchmaking.” She gazed

soberly at Sasha. “It’s only a suggestion, Sash. You absolutely don’t have to do this. It would be a great favor to me if you did, though.”

Esme’s soft, warm hand on hers was the only thing keeping Sasha from fleeing back to the kitchen without another word. She fished through a dozen possible responses. Terror made her want to say no, but the idea of pretending to be Ruby’s girlfriend filled her with a fizzy happiness she found immediately addictive.

Girlfriends touched, they hugged, they were always close and aware of each other. To be so deeply in Ruby’s orbit for a week, even if only for that week, could be like a test run. Maybe it would help Sasha confess her feelings out loud at last, if she liked it as much as she thought she would. And if it didn’t, well, she’d have that week to keep her warm for a while, at least.

“Yes,” she blurted out before she could talk herself out of it. “Yes, I’ll play girlfriend, take some of the pressure off you. A New York vacation could be a lot of fun even with all the wedding stuff.”

She felt Esme and Cam staring at her, incredulity from her boss and mischievous satisfaction from her friend. But in front of her there was only Ruby, pretty Ruby, sweet Ruby with her face lighting up in gratitude and happiness that was all for Sasha. She basked in the warmth of it as Ruby babbled, “Sash, thank you, thank you, yes, we’re going to have so much fun! I’ll take you to all my favorite places; I can’t thank you enough for this.”

“I’ll text you, we need to have a meet up, make sure we have our stories all in order,” Sasha said, pulling her hand out of Esme’s. Her cheeks were burning red with excitement and amazement. She could not believe what she’d just agreed to. “Tickets have got to be piling up in the kitchen. I’ve been out here for too long—gotta go, Rubes.”

Before anyone else could say anything, Sasha turned on her heel and all but raced back to the Indigo Lounge kitchen. Cooking made sense, food didn't give her any kind of confusing feelings, and she needed to surround herself with that blissful normality before she could talk herself out of the decision she'd just made.

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"This can't keep happening," Nicola protested, trying to pull the heavy quilt over her naked body. "You can't keep coming through my window, Declan, you're compromising my virtue."

"I'll be compromising more than your virtue tonight," Declan growled, striding towards the four-poster bed. He stood at the end of the bed, pulling his dun-brown linen shirt over his head. Nicola, pressed up against the wall as far as she could get, couldn't take her eyes off of the dark whorls of hair on his muscled chest. She knew it would feel silky and warm under her fingers, and she longed to touch it.

But then what he'd said penetrated the fog of her growing desire. "Compromise more... Declan, no, we can't!" She clutched the quilt more tightly. "My father will kill us both."

"Nay, he'll have no choice but to marry ye to me at last. And if he tries to kill me, he'll sore regret it, lass." His eyes crackled with dark fire. "I love ye, Nicola. I want to take you back to Inverary as my lady. I'll not wait any longer, nor make you wait..."

Ruby slammed her laptop shut and packed it away into her messenger bag. Declan was getting a little more non-consensual than she'd preferred, and she needed a break from him so she could figure out how to move forward with more enthusiastic participation from the lust-filled but reticent Nicola.

She looked around at the coffee shop Sasha had suggested for their first Story Matching Sunday, as Ruby was calling the knowledge exchanging sessions. It was a nice place, she thought. Not as boho-glitzy as the Indigo Lounge, more of a cozy, ersatz-Tuscan grandma's house vibe with white-painted stucco walls and curated clutter everywhere. Ruby observed rococo frames on the Renaissance-esque art prints, gold-trimmed edges on the handpainted porcelain vases holding elaborate bouquets of silk flowers, and lots of cherubs hanging on the walls. The furniture was an eclectic assortment of battered, overstuffed chairs and mismatched old tables. Yes. It was nice here.

The coffee hadn't been bad either—not as good as Natalie's, but definitely serviceable, and it came with a tasty amaretto biscotti. She hoped the food was good, too. Ruby's stomach growled. She was ready to eat a proper lunch now, but Sasha hadn't arrived yet, and Ruby didn't want to be rude and start without her.

Usually on a Sunday, Ruby joined the core Indigo Lounge gang—Esme, her wife Nora, Cam, Mia Cortés, Esme's daughter Holly, Deborah and Sasha—for a multi-hour picnic hike in the Hollywood Hills. It was a welcome time in the sun with her friends and generally a good break away from her desk. But this week she'd begged off in favor of getting more work done on her brooding Highlander romance.

Sasha had gone on the hike, but she'd said she'd be at the Villa Primavera Café by 3 PM. They'd spent the week putting together lists of what they each knew about the other and were going to swap them and expand on them today, just to get them started. But Sasha wasn't here.

Ruby checked her phone. No messages, and it was 3:15 PM. It wasn't like Sasha to be late for anything.

Just then, the little cowbells on the café door jingled, and Ruby twisted to peer around the fraying wing of her chair. Finally!

Sasha stood in the doorway, looking around the busy café. Ruby raised a hand to wave her over. I see why she was late, Ruby thought. She'd expected Sasha to show up straight from the hike, in her usual beat-up black denim shorts, an old sleeveless t-shirt, her ancient brown leather hiking boots and a red bandana over her short curly crop.

Instead, Sasha seemed to have made an effort at a level Ruby didn't recall seeing before. She'd clearly gone home and showered off the grime of the Hills first. And she was wearing an ensemble Ruby didn't see her in often, a neat black button-down with the sleeves rolled up, good black jeans without a rip or stray string in sight, and her best black combat boots.

In contrast, Ruby had shown up in black yoga leggings, lipstick-red Birkenstock clogs, and a long t-shirt that had once been black but was now an indeterminate depressing gray. Sasha's short hair was styled so that her dark quiff of curls drooped dashingly over her brow. Ruby's red mop was about two days past needing a wash, loaded with dry shampoo, and she'd only just managed to wrestle it all into a bun. She and her clothes were otherwise clean, but she felt very sloppy and not put together at all. Sasha, on the other hand, looked amazing, and Ruby could see other women in the café surreptitiously checking her out.

It was mortifying.

"Rubes, you look great." Sasha sat down in the lilac wing chair opposite Ruby and smiled. "How was writing?"

Ruby stared at her friend. "I look great? I look dragged through a hedge backwards, Sash. By a bear. You look amazing, I'm a mess."

"Nah, I just wanted to show you that I clean up pretty good." Sasha spread out her arms to show off and beamed. "You won't have to worry about me looking scruffy in

front of your fam.”

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“I wasn’t worried at all, but I will say I appreciate your concern. You’re going to do fine.” More than fine, really. Sasha looked better than any of the guys Ruby’s sister and cousins had ever brought home, and Ruby knew for a fact she was a thousand times more respectable as a soft-spoken and talented chef. She’d be proud to have Sasha on her arm at Danny and Angela’s wedding, she realized, and was pleased.

Sasha seemed to blush, and then fumbled for a menu from the little holder at the center of the table. “Have you eaten yet? The food here is so good.”

“I had a coffee, but I was waiting for you.” Ruby plucked up a menu for herself and opened it. She’d tried to look at it before, but everything sounded great, and it had only made her hungrier. The same thing was happening now, and she couldn’t decide.

The menu was whisked out of her hands. Startled, Ruby looked up to see Sasha grinning at her. “Hey. You trust me?”

“Always,” Ruby replied, puzzled.

“OK. Let me handle this. I know what hunger does to you, and I know what you’ll like.” Closing the menus, Sasha waved a lanky redheaded waiter over. “Hi, Benji.”

“Sash! Great to see you again. You want your usual?”

“Sure thing, Benji. And listen, for my friend here, can Frankie make the roasted deli chicken and arugula sandwich with herbed goat cheese and red pepper pesto? And the marinated mushrooms and olives with bocconcini, please.” Sasha tapped her chin. “And the raspberry cannoli for dessert.”

Benji winked at Ruby as he wrote the order down. “You’re gonna love it. Sash and our chef went to culinary school together, so she knows what Frankie does best.”

“It sounds amazing,” Ruby said, and blushed as her stomach growled loudly. Benji and Sasha chuckled.

“I’ll get the appetizer plate out here fast,” Benji promised, stuffing his notebook into the pocket of his apron.

When he’d departed, Ruby tilted her head and smiled at Sasha. “So you really do come here a lot.”

“Sure, Frankie and I go way back, and we support each other’s places. You’ll probably recognize her when she brings the appetizer out, she’s at the Lounge all the time.” Sasha looked thoughtful. “Actually, she’s hooked up with Cam a couple of times in the past.”

“Who hasn’t?” Ruby laughed. “I’ll look forward to meeting her properly. But hey, can we get started with our little note swap? It’ll take my mind off the food while we wait.”

Sasha asked. “Didn’t eat breakfast, did you?”

“I did! I mean, I had a Pop-Tart and a raspberry smoothie...” Ruby thought back over the many hours she’d spent foodless. “I did forget to eat a snack, though.”

“I don’t know how you survive, Rubes. You need someone to look after you.” Sasha looked like she might be blushing. But before Ruby could decide for sure if she was, Sasha pulled out her phone and busied herself pulling up the Notes app. “OK. So, here’s what I know about you.” She passed the phone over.

Ruby pulled up her own list and handed her phone to Sasha. She was shocked to see the length of the neatly categorized list about herself. Compared to her own hurriedly written list about Sasha, this was a novel. It was embarrassing how short she'd come up. She was an author! Supposedly writers were the best observers of people and Sasha was a friend she cared about a great deal. Yet her notes felt like a pathetic grocery list. Sasha, though, knew so much about her, Ruby couldn't take it in. She must talk about herself so much for Sasha to know all this.

Ruby Margarita Fierelli, Age 35

Food: Loves fruit and vegetables. Eats meat, but not on pizza—never on pizza! Sweet potato chips are a fave, mango-passionfruit milkshakes too. Hates any seafood except for shrimp. Not a breakfast fan, big on lunch. Forgets to eat.

Drink: Prefers Diet Coke over anything. Drinks coffee, smoothies, sometimes fizzy water. Iced tea is a no. Likes dirty martinis or hard cider for alcoholic beverages.

Family: Has one older sister (Rose), two older brothers (Domenic and Dante, twins), one younger brother (Daniel). Mom is Elena, Dad is Dom but they call him Papa Dom. Many, many aunts, uncles and cousins. Born and raised on Staten Island. Catholic. Parents are second-generation Italian Americans.

School: Graduated from Our Lady of the Sacred Heart girls' Catholic high school in NY. Did all right enough to get scholarships. Went to UCLA for a BFA in Creative Writing. Decided to stay in LA after, tried to write screenplays but didn't like it. Worked as a receptionist at a car dealership, wrote in her free time. Self-published a few romance novels for fun and got picked up by a publisher. Between the self-pubs and publisher and some ghostwriting, she has been able to support herself on writing for five years now.

Pet: Has a Scottie named Winston. He's ten and Ruby makes his food herself. Likes

to play ball, doesn't love noise. A Good Boy.

Music: Likes Fall Out Boy, old Panic! At The Disco, Paramore. Seems to have had a Taylor Swift phase in college—only ever heard her listen to that Speak Now album. Discovered Phoebe Bridgers and Chappell Roan in the last year and enjoys them enough to have gone to concerts. Does not usually like going to concerts, too many people.

Hobbies: Hiking, writing, sometimes attempts to crochet things but has yet to complete a project. Likes watching crime dramas. Otherwise, not many hobbies, works too hard and should take breaks more often.

Ruby had never felt so seen in her life. It made her even more deeply ashamed of how little she'd ever observed about Sasha in return.

Sasha couldn't look at Ruby. Her friend had handed her a perfectly normal list of things she knew about Sasha. In return, Sasha had basically handed over a stalker's dossier. Was Ruby going to think she just lurked outside of her apartment building in her spare time? How embarrassing.

Sash - Things To Remember

CIA culinary school in Napa. Also did some other courses elsewhere in the world. Really good at cooking, very imaginative! Comes up with amazing flavor combos people wouldn't think of. Very conscious of allergens for friends and regulars.

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Likes pizza with mortadella and burrata. Drinks rarely—maybe red wine? Craft beer occasionally.

Only child. Mother still lives in (??) Minnesota. Father died sometime when Sash was a teenager.

No pets. Kind enough to take care of Winston when I travel :)

Does not like ice in water.

Always hear her listening to Lilith Fair type music. Lesbian folk?

Goes to the movies when she can, pretty sure she has a FilmForum membership? Does that Polar Bear Club thing too in San Pedro every NYD.

Asian food seems to be her favorite. How come she never cooks anything Asian inspired for the Lounge?

Doesn't like Nutella. Who doesn't like Nutella?

The last one made her forget her embarrassment for a moment, and Sasha chuckled. "Someone with a tree-nut allergy doesn't like Nutella, Rubes."

Ruby looked up, blue eyes round with astonishment. "You're allergic to tree nuts?"

"That's why my pesto at the Lounge doesn't taste 'right' to you. Esme's budget didn't stretch to pine nuts for a long time, and I couldn't use almonds as a cheaper

sub because then I couldn't do taste tests. So, I toast pepitas and use them instead."

"Oh." Ruby bit her lip. "Do you carry an EpiPen around? I should probably know that if you do."

"I get one every year just in case, but I've never had a severe anaphylactic reaction. Just nausea, some itching, but my throat doesn't swell up. Still, better safe than sorry." Sasha paused, thinking about how to break the next piece of news to Ruby. She'd thought she would take this secret to the grave. "Rubes, you should know... I don't have a pet because I'm allergic to dogs, too, and they're the only kind of pet I'd want."

Ruby frowned for a moment, and then gasped as realization hit. "Sash! But you always watch Winston for me!"

Sasha could only shrug sheepishly. "I take Claritin starting a few days before I take him in, and for a few days after you take him home. I also get someone to really deep clean my place afterwards."

Horror filled Ruby's eyes before she clapped her hands over her mouth. "Oh my God," she said, muffled through her fingers. She looked like she was on the verge of tears as she pulled her hands down. "Sasha, I'm so sorry. You should have told me! I could be asking Natalie or Esme or anyone else to watch Winston."

"Please don't," Sasha begged. "Don't! It's as close as I've ever come to having a pet, and I love Winston. It's worth the effort to me. I promise if it was a really bad allergy, I'd tell you no, but it's livable, I swear to you it is."

Ruby looked like she was about to keep protesting, and her eyes were still shiny. But just as she opened her mouth, Frankie swept in from the kitchen with her tray of marinated goodies and a plate of crunchy, buttery garlic bread crisps. "Ladies!

Special delivery.”

It wasn't the first time Frankie's jocular attitude and delicious food had broken up an awkward mood for Sasha, and she found herself grateful for her chef friend's uncanny ability to know when she was needed yet again. Sasha smiled up into Frankie's wise gray-green eyes and got a knowing wink and nod in return.

Frankie set down her snacky burden and slapped Sasha on the back with a strong hand. “Good to see ya again, Sash. It's been way too long since you've been here.”

“You haven't been at the Lounge, either,” Sasha pointed out.

“Ah, yeah, but you know, Cam's been working there a lot lately and things are a little...” Frankie ran a hand through her edgy short dirty-blonde hair and rubbed at the back of her neck. “Eh, you know how it is.”

Ruby's face went from woeful to intrigued. She propped her chin in her hands and beamed up at Frankie. “I don't know, I'd like to know. I'm nosy.”

Frankie glanced down at Ruby, then did a double take. Sasha wondered if that was interest she saw in Frankie's eyes. “I've seen you at the Lounge, too. With the laptop.”

“That's me.” Ruby pointed at her black messenger bag.

“Frankie Mancini, this is Ruby Fierelli.” Sasha gestured between the two of them. “Ruby, Frankie.”

Ruby sat up straight. “Mancini?”

“Fierelli?” Frankie raised one dark eyebrow and grinned. And that was for sure interest

in her eyes now. Sasha groaned internally. When Frankie wanted to, she could turn on the charm as high as Cam did, and few could resist. Or wanted to. Plus, she was tall, slender, androgynously sexy and had an aura of the bad girl that a lot of women liked.

Sasha had none of that. She was 5'5, felt like she was built like a female Patton Oswalt, had always been too shy to speak up about her feelings for people. No confidence or charm or anything. If Frankie decided to chase after Ruby, Sasha couldn't compete.

But to her immense relief, Frankie just winked down at her and grabbed a small wooden chair that was nearby, turning it backwards with a deft twist of her wrist and plopping down into it. She crossed her arms over the back of the chair and leaned forward, grinning. "Queens?"

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“Staten Island,” Ruby replied. “How about you?”

“Brooklyn. Public or Catholic high school?”

Ruby rolled her eyes and groaned. “Catholic.”

Frankie’s eyes twinkled. “With the little skirts?”

“Made me who I am today.” Ruby giggled and blushed. Then she reached for one of the skewers of tiny mozzarella balls, olives, and mushrooms. “But you’re avoiding my curiosity. How do you and Cam know each other?”

“And look there, I have a pair of sandwiches to go finish.” As quickly as she’d sat down, Frankie was back up on her feet. “Sash, always great to see you. Ruby, nice to meet you, let me know how you like your lunch today.” And she scurried off.

Ruby raised an eyebrow at Sasha. “Something I said?”

“Frankie, like Cam, is allergic to talking about anything that might resemble feelings.” Sasha chuckled and picked up her own skewer. “Try your skewer. Frankie won’t tell me what all she puts in the marinade, I can’t even get her to cough up the brand of olive oil.”

Her mouth went dry as she watched Ruby slowly slide a plump, glistening Baby Bella mushroom off of the little wooden skewer and pop it into her mouth. Some of the oily marinade clung to her full bottom lip, making it shine in the sunlight that filled the café. Her eyes closed in blissful delight, and a moan so sweetly filthy it

made Sasha squirm in her chair emerged from Ruby's mouth. "Oh, my God. This is amazing. So simple, but it's the most delicious thing I've had today."

"Well, you started your day with a Pop Tart, things could only go up from there," Sasha managed to get out. She couldn't recall Ruby ever looking or sounding like this over anything she'd made for her. Jealousy made her stomach churn. She looked down and toyed with the skewer she was holding, her appetite gone. Had coming here been a mistake? Sasha was feeling more inadequate by the minute.

Maybe it had been dumb to agree to this silly wedding date scheme. It was exposing her as a weird, insecure, stalkery mess and she didn't feel like she could do anything right. And it was only their first knowledge swapping session!

The more Ruby got to know her, the less likely Sasha felt it was that she'd ever be able to confess her affections because there was no way Ruby would ever see her as anything but a big snoop who needed to be kept at a very long arms' length.

It was a relief when the far too smoldery Frankie scampered off back to her kitchen. Ruby had never liked being come onto so strong. Even Cam, the single time she'd tried, hadn't been so intense.

At heart—and she wore that heart on her sleeve—Ruby Margarita Fierelli was a huge, swoony romantic. That was why she wrote the books that she wrote, one paean to the love she sought after another. Even in Declan and Nicola's consensually questionable and deeply heterosexual love story, she'd managed to weave in threads of real feeling and intense yearning.

Casual dalliances had never been her thing. Ruby needed connection, a spiritual tie on some level, before she'd even so much as think of kissing anyone. Flirts like Frankie just made her uncomfortable.

Frankie's culinary skills, though, were certainly on par with Sasha's, and Ruby was grateful to her friend for recommending Villa Primavera. Just these simple little marinated skewers of deliciousness alone were dreamy, an explosion of complex flavors in her mouth. An instant pick-me-up.

She'd picked all of the mushrooms, olives, and tiny cheese balls off of two skewers and consumed them in a fit of blind gustatory bliss before realizing that Sasha hadn't moved or eaten a bite. "Sash, what's up? Don't leave me to eat all of these alone, because I will."

Sasha shook her head like she was snapping out of something. "Oh. Yeah. Sure." She picked up one of the skewers and seemed to examine it with a slightly sour expression on her face.

Ruby blinked. "I know it's nothing like what you'd have made, Sash, but it's still really good food, and you recommended this place and even placed our order! Why do you look like it's personally offended you all of a sudden?"

Quick as a flash, the sourness fled Sasha's face, and she stuck the skewer into her mouth, pulling a mushroom off with a grin. "You're right, Rubes. I just had a weird moment. Listen, let's get back to these lists. Now you know about my allergies. Do you have any?"

"Only to being aggressively flirted with," Ruby mused, and when Sasha laughed, all of the peculiar awkward tension that had been hovering over them like a first date dissipated.

By the time their incredibly delicious sandwiches arrived, they were well on their way to being the best fake girlfriends in the world.

“Ifell down the steps at the Grand Colony Ballroom and broke my wrist on prom night,” Ruby said, nibbling on a sweet potato chip. Sasha jerked her head up from where she was sliding a bowl of Southwestern Black Bean Salad in front of Esme’s daughter, Holly. Both of them stared at Ruby.

Holly broke the silence first. “You went to prom?”

“That’s your takeaway?” Ruby shut her laptop and threw her hands in the air. “Just that I went to prom?”

“I went to school in the States,” Holly said. “Not to Catholic school, but I knew plenty of girls who did. They didn’t tend to have proms. I’m curious.”

Sasha was intrigued, herself. “I’ll tell you about my prom if you tell us about yours.”

Holly’s head swiveled, beachy blonde waves flying. “You went to prom?”

“You’re gonna love the story,” Sasha promised. “But Rubes, you first.”

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Ruby shrugged. “I mean, the broken wrist is the most exciting part of it all. I was the sparkly bearded for my gay bestie, Michael Colangelo. You’ll meet him at the wedding, Sash, he’s an old friend of the family. Like I call his mom Aunt Gabriella old. Anyway. He went to public school, and I went to prom with him. That’s it.”

“And the wrist?” Sasha asked.

“I’ve never worn heels much.” She extended one foot out and pointed at her battered black combat boot. “It turned out to be a wet night, not a good one to be wearing rhinestone sandals with toothpicks for heels. I lost my balance, missed a step, and went right down. They’re concrete steps and I probably should have broken more than my wrist, but I was lucky. Although the nuns did make sure to let me know I deserved what I got for going to a sinful public high school prom.”

“Well, that’s fucked up,” Holly remarked. She propped her chin in her hand and slid her gaze over to Sasha. “Your turn, Ms. Top Chef.”

Sasha stifled a chuckle as she picked up a cocktail glass and began to mix Holly and Ruby a pair of sparkling hard cider cocktails that she liked to call Fletcher Fizzes. “Buckle up, ladies. It was 2004 and I was in a floor length, hot pink zebra-print gown. And yes,” she grinned, sliding the drinks in front of them and enjoying the dropped jaws, “my hair was long enough to put in an updo, and I wore platform heels...”

“It’s less than a month to the wedding,” Ruby stated, turning the shiny lipstick-red motorcycle helmet around in her hands. Her stomach was bubbling up with nervous acid. “Is it a good idea for us to go riding a motorcycle like this? What if we crash somewhere?”

“Don’t you trust me, Rubes?” Sasha’s eyes were wide and earnest under the curly cloud of her bangs. She held up her own helmet, a shiny dark blue thing that reminded Ruby of astronauts or science fiction movies. “I’ve been riding for years. You’ve seen me riding with Dykes on Bikes.”

“I know, but...” She’d never been on a motorcycle in her life. But she had known that Sasha loved riding hers, and any real girlfriend would be able to talk about sharing that great love at least a few times. To talk about what a thrill it was, and how nice it would feel to be so close to your loved one...

But also, she could hear her mother in her head, screeching, Irresponsible! Reckless! Dangerous! Don’t you remember the Greenfield kid from two blocks away that bought a bike and crashed it the same day? Horrible tragedy, the family moved away, never the same.

“We’re gonna stick to low speeds, residential streets. It’ll be all right, Ruby.” Sasha’s voice was soft and reassuring. “I promise. I’ll keep you safe.”

Ruby believed her despite her nerves. Sasha was experienced. They would be fine. She took a deep breath. “Be brave, Rubes,” she muttered to herself. With a firm nod to Sasha, she started to buckle her helmet on. Her fingers fumbled with the clasps.

“Here.” Sasha stepped up close and helped her out, her short fingers warm under Ruby’s chin. She looked focused as she adjusted the straps, making sure they were snug but not cutting into Ruby’s skin. It was nice, Ruby thought. She always felt like she was being fussed over, taken care of by Sasha. If this is what Sasha treated her friends like, then surely any girlfriend would be lucky.

Once they both had their helmets on, they stepped over to the motorcycle and Sasha mounted up. “You remember what I told you? What was in that video I showed you?” she asked.

“Yes.” With care, Ruby put a hand on Sasha’s shoulder and a foot on the peg she’d been shown. She boosted herself up on the cargo box, swung her leg through and over, and sat down. Not the smoothest motion, she thought, but not bad for her first time. The bike was still upright, that counted for a lot in her book.

Ruby grabbed Sasha’s waist, enjoying the scent of her friend’s worn black leather vest for a moment before she pulled her visor down. Sasha lifted herself up and bore down on the kickstarter a few times, bringing the bike to rumbling life beneath them. A thrill of excitement rattled through Ruby as they took off.

She felt the wind as it made the low red ponytail at the nape of her neck stream out behind them like a banner. I should have braided it up, she thought, her hands absently squeezing Sasha a little tighter. It’ll take forever to comb all the tangles out.

Yet somehow, she couldn’t bring herself to care. Even though they were cruising through the residential streets of Lincoln Heights at a nice and leisurely 25 miles per hour, there was still something exciting and even a little romantic about this whole experience.

And it was a little erotic. Ruby’s face went hot under the helmet as the engine of Sasha’s vintage Kawasaki throbbed between her legs. She’d always been a girl who liked a big, powerful vibrator, something that made her whole pussy hum. She squirmed in her seat as arousal began to wash through her.

Although she had to concentrate and move with Sasha as they turned corners, Ruby couldn’t get her mind off of what was happening in her core, her pussy warm and heavy as the motorcycle’s vibrations worked her over. “Can we go faster?” she shouted, hoping Sasha could hear her.

Sasha kept her eyes on the road but yelled back, “Only if we get on the freeway.”

“Do that. Go there,” Ruby commanded, biting her lip. “Get on the freeway.”

She could sense that Sasha was surprised, but all the same, she began to point the bike towards Highway 5. Smoothly, they merged onto the on-ramp and then into the traffic. Sasha weaved the bike in and out amongst the cars and trucks that surrounded them. The sudden increase in noise and danger around them should have made Ruby panic, but all she felt was the waves of beautiful, rumbling vibrations rippling through her.

An intense feeling began to build up as they danced their way through Los Angeles traffic, a mounting tide that ebbed and flowed through Ruby and made her breath begin to hitch. She swallowed hard, her fingers tangling up in Sasha’s vest as all she could think about was the closeness, the vibration and the tingle that arose within her.

A sharp release waved through, a slight orgasmic shrill as the bike pulsated below her. Ruby had to bite back any moans that tried to emerge from her throat. She’d never been quiet in bed, but she couldn’t let Sasha know what was going on in the Kawasaki’s passenger seat. With Herculean effort, for the first time in her life, Ruby managed to moan quietly, her fingers white-knuckled and her calves almost cramping with the intensity of the experience.

She became aware that Sasha was steering the bike back off the freeway, aiming for a gas station just near the off-ramp. As the Kawasaki came to a halt, Ruby began to take stock of herself. Her face always flushed, so she was happy to keep the helmet on and the visor firmly down for a minute until that subsided. And she wasn’t about to get off the seat while Sasha was in sight; if there was a damp impression on the leather, she wanted to dry it off surreptitiously.

And she had no idea how she was going to look Sasha in the eyes for a while. She’d never once had any kind of sexual thoughts or vibes around her dearest friend, and she needed some time to unpack what had just happened. And, Ruby thought, a

delicious shiver rippling through her, to relive some of it with her Hitachi wand at home.

Sasha turned the bike off and dismounted, turning to look at Ruby as she pulled off her helmet. “I didn’t want to go too long for your first time,” she said, and once again Ruby was grateful for her own helmet and visor as her face flushed. “And I’m thirsty. You wanna come with me to get a drink?”

“Um, no, I’m a little...” Ruby’s mind whirled. How to describe her current physical state innocently? “My legs, they’re...”

Sasha chuckled. “Ah yeah. I remember my first passenger ride. And I didn’t even get taken on the freeway. Sit, recover. You want a Diet Coke?”

“Yes, please,” Ruby replied in a mildly strangled voice. Sasha looked at her a little oddly, but then just offered her a friendly little smile and turned to disappear into the convenience store. As soon as the door shut behind her, Ruby scrambled—carefully—off of the motorcycle and lifted her helmet visor a bit to peer at her seat.

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It did look a little suspiciously shiny, but not really any different than if she'd only sweated in it. Still, she grabbed a handful of rough brown paper towels from a window washing station and wiped the leather clean and dry.

She didn't dare try to get back on without Sasha there to balance the bike, so Ruby just paced around until her friend emerged from the convenience store with a bottle of red Gatorade in one hand and a Diet Coke in the other. She was smiling, clearly happy with how their ride had gone, and Ruby could only keep blushing furiously under her helmet. To her great relief, however, she found herself able to meet Sasha's gaze—albeit still guarded by the shelter of her helmet visor.

“Hey, you didn't have to get off the bike, I told you to stay on there,” Sasha chided as she handed the cold soda over.

“I couldn't, I was too excited after the ride,” Ruby said. It wasn't exactly a lie. She tucked the soda under her arm and unbuckled her helmet once her face didn't feel like a hot tomato anymore.

Sasha beamed. “I'm so happy you enjoyed it. I was surprised when you said to go on the freeway.”

Somehow, Ruby didn't choke on her first sip of Diet Coke. Enjoyed it? Putting it mildly... “I was feeling brave.”

“I guess so! I'm proud of you, Rubes.” Sasha looked a little bashful, and she was fidgeting with the cap of her Gatorade bottle. “Thank you for coming along with me.”

“I’ll definitely be able to talk about our rides together, it’ll be a nice touch.” If I leave out some details...!

Sasha perked up. “Yeah, it will.” She took a long swig of her Gatorade and recapped it. “You ready?”

“Ready?” Ruby blinked. “Ready for what?”

“I’ve got to take you home, don’t I?” Opening up the cargo box, she put her drink inside and reached for Ruby’s. With suddenly limp fingers, Ruby relinquished the bottle. “Come on, I’ll get on, you hop on behind me. It’ll be even better this time.”

“I bet,” Ruby squeaked, jamming the helmet back onto her head before Sasha could see her face go scarlet. She’d forgotten entirely about getting home! As she waited for Sasha to get back onto the Kawasaki, Ruby rubbed her sweaty palms down along her thighs. Things were already starting to heat up again under her panties as she thought about their journey back down Highway 5...

“Well, I think we have to talk about the last topic. The one we’ve been avoiding,” Sasha said, a week before they were due to fly to New York.

Ruby looked up from her laptop, her face creased in adorable confusion. “Eh?”

She was tucked away in one of the Lounge’s more secluded booths, still working her way through her Highlander romance. Sasha had heard her swearing at someone named Declan every time she’d come over with a snack or drink refill, and she finally decided that it was time she interrupt her friend and force her to take a break.

She’d come armed with a grilled mushroom and onion flatbread—on the Lounge menu as the ‘Fierelli Special’—and a mango passionfruit milkshake heaped with whipped cream and a pile of extra maraschino cherries. Carefully, she placed them on

the table and slid into the bench seat opposite Ruby. Then she pushed the laptop lid down and shoved it aside. “We need to talk about...” She paused, and her face got warm. “Our histories.”

“Our... oh.” And at that, Ruby’s cheeks went even redder than Sasha knew her face was going. But why? Though they’d never specifically discussed sex and dating before, Sasha knew that Ruby was no more a vestal virgin than she was herself. And she was a romance writer! What the hell could be making Ruby go redder than the cherries leaking their sugary juice into her milkshake?

Ruby’s answer didn’t provide so much as a kilowatt of enlightenment, at least not at first. She tugged at the collar of her snug white t-shirt and swallowed, her cheeks still a becoming rosy hue as she began to speak. “I don’t have much of a history, even at my age. I mean, I made out with plenty of girls in high school. But when I got to college...” Her blush extended up to her hairline. “Well. Everyone said that was when I should experiment. Find out what I liked...” She trailed off.

Sasha leaned forward and touched Ruby’s hand. “You don’t have to spill all the gory details.”

“I’m not, I mean...” Ruby looked down and shook her head. “There aren’t any details. I’m not a virgin, you know that. But college is when I found out that I’m just not built for casual sex. I tried, I tried a lot. But it was always so awkward and sometimes I’d just get up and leave in the middle of it all.”

“Oh.” Sasha sat back and blinked. “Oh, okay.”

She’d never heard of anyone doing such a thing. Her heart ached for college Ruby. She couldn’t imagine having such a hard time doing the one thing everyone thought college kids were supposed to do. She certainly had.

“I wanted to find the right person.” Ruby took off her glasses and played with them as she spoke. So, I kept trying and trying and trying and...”

“Rubes, stop.” Sasha gently tugged Ruby’s glasses out of her hands and set them aside. Then she wrapped those hands in her own. “I don’t think anyone’s going to ask us about all the nitty gritty bits. Just tell me about the ones you dated that your family is likely to ask me about.”

Ruby inhaled and closed her eyes before letting her deep breath slowly out. “Not many. No one I’ve ever taken home. Um, I think I only talked to Mom about a couple of them. That one Irish gal, Michelle, you remember her from a few summers ago? She was only in LA for a few months to do a music residency here. She liked my books, I liked her music. It ended well.”

Michelle had been a willowy Celtic siren with pale skin and a waist-length tumble of jet-black curls. Sasha did remember her well, remembered how Ruby had been immediately enamored with her the first time she’d unleashed her soulful Irish folk-rock on the Lounge, her guitar and voice like a silver flute weaving a spell that had captured everyone who heard it. How they’d been inseparable for weeks, heads bent over Ruby’s laptop as they wrote songs together.

Sasha had never hated another human being more in her entire life. And Michelle hadn’t deserved that; she’d always seemed lovely and her talent was undeniable. It was just that she clearly reached Ruby on a level Sasha couldn’t comprehend. What a relief it had been to see her sail back off to Galway.

No need to tell Ruby any of that, though. “I remember Michelle,” she said simply.

Ruby wiped her eye with the heel of her hand. “And then the other one I think I talked to mom and dad about was Antonia.”

Antonia. Now that woman barely deserved to be called a human being, and Sasha didn't feel even a little bad about despising her. She'd been hired to wait tables at Indigo while she was pursuing a PhD in some kind of weird obscure subject, Oriental Pottery or something. Again, she and Ruby had connected deeply. But Antonia was not the sweet soul Michelle had been. She was a narcissistic emotional vampire who had jerked Ruby around for the better part of a year.

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Sasha, Esme, and Cam had had to put Ruby back together after Antonia disappeared in the night without a word to anyone. That had been a year and a half ago.

“I haven’t dated anyone since Antonia,” Ruby said, her words matching the timeline Sasha was putting together in her head. “I feel like I’m just bad at identifying love, like... what’s a soulmate? I have no idea. I write all those books but I keep missing the mark...”

Sasha desperately wanted to get Ruby out of her head. This wasn’t what she had intended when she brought up the topic of their histories. She’d thought they’d have a fun and light conversation, maybe crack a few jokes about a list, like Alice’s Chart onThe L Word. She wasn’t altogether sure what to do with this darker turn.

But while she was still casting about for something, anything that could break up the black storm clouds gathering over Ruby’s head, Ruby lifted her head, shook her hair back, and squared her shoulders. “OK, so that got depressing. Sorry, Sash. The book is giving me issues and it’s just bumming meout. I feel incompetent.”

“Well, you’re not,” Sasha replied loyally. “You’re a great writer. You’ll fix whatever is going wrong. You always have the best plots.”

“I forget that you’ve read everything I’ve written.” Ruby gazed at her fondly, and it warmed Sasha’s heart. “You’re such a good friend.”

“No, you’re such a good writer. Reading your stuff is a gift, Rubes. And you are...” Sasha swallowed. She felt like she was about to skirt a little too closely to her actual feelings. “You are a gift, too. Any woman would be so lucky to have you.”

“You’re too great to me, Sash. World’s best fake girlfriend.” Ruby tilted her head and smiled winningly. “Tell me about your history now. I feel like I remember you having a big ol’ hound dog phase...”

Sasha blushed. “Embarrassing.”

“But I’ll get to boast to my family that I’m the gal who tamed you, they’ll eat it up.” Ruby grinned. “Now, spill, lady. I do want all the gory details.”

5

“Do you kids have extra chargers? Did you remember your toothbrushes? Condoms?”

“Esme!” Sasha went hot and, she was sure, red from her neck up to the roots of her hair. Next to her in the back seat of Esme’s car, Ruby could only cackle. Since Esme had met and married her wife Nora and since Holly had returned from Australia, her sweetly dry sense of humor had taken on a slightly bawdier twist. Ruby loved it, but Sasha was still having a hard time adjusting to it.

Ruby patted Sasha on the head. “You better develop a higher tolerance to dirty jokes in the next few hours, Sash. Esme is super tame compared to my brothers. And it doesn’t even compare to my mom after two glasses of red!”

“Oh, God,” Sasha groaned, slapping her forehead.

Esme giggled as she pulled over at LAX. “Get her airplane tipsy, that’ll give her a head start on courage, maybe.” She pressed the button to unlock the car doors. “Right, out, there’s a skycap already looking like he wants to call the cops on me for being here.”

Ruby scrambled to let herself out and run to the trunk, which opened as she arrived. Sasha came around from her side of the car, and they hauled their bags out together.

“No time for hugs,” Esme called out. “Go on, go!”

They’d barely cleared the curb when Esme screeched off. The skycap she’d noted walked up to Ruby and Sasha with a scowl. “You’re not supposed to park and drop here.”

“Sorry,” Ruby cooed, batting her eyelashes at him.

To Sasha’s surprise, the blatantly fake flirtation actually seemed to work, as the man actually blushed and ducked his head. “Well, you just make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“It won’t,” Ruby sang back over her shoulder as she turned towards the airport doors.

“Lies,” Sasha mumbled as they scooted off and away from the grumpy attendant. “We’ll do it again next week when Esme picks us up.”

“They don’t have to know that.” Briskly, Ruby headed for the American Airlines check-in kiosks. “Now come here. Give me your ID, hold my bag, I’ll check us in.”

It felt very couple-ish, the way they easily swapped the items and Ruby handled their check-in. Sasha liked it. But don’t get used to it, she reminded herself. This wasn’t real, and it had a time limit.

It was still nice, though.

Ruby pulled a pair of boarding passes off of the machine and pointed towards the bag drop. “Let’s get those bags off your hands.” Then, to Sasha’s surprise, Ruby leaned

over and kissed her on the cheek.

She didn't know how to react to that. Speechless, she could only stare at Ruby, whose face flushed a very pretty shade of pink. "Sorry," she whispered, pulling her messenger bag out of Sasha's suddenly limp hands. "I was watching a bunch of rom-coms this week. And I remembered something we haven't gone over. Or practiced."

Sasha's mouth was dry. She was pretty sure she knew where this was going. "What's that?" she rasped out.

"PDAs," Ruby replied, her cheeks turning even rosier. "I definitely should have remembered earlier. I mean, we've both been in relationships, I write romance... but in a real relationship you don't have to think about those things. They just happen."

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“Right.” She could still feel the impression of Ruby’s lips on her cheek. Would there be a lipstick print if she looked in the mirror? She’d really, really like that.

“So we should practice a little on the way to New York,” Ruby concluded, biting her bottom lip. “If that’s okay?”

“It’s okay,” Sasha squeaked, then cleared her throat. “It’s okay,” she repeated, more normally.

Surviving this week with her heart intact was looking more impossible by the minute.

Ruby picked up her messenger bag from the utilitarian gray TSA tray and slung it across her chest. One conveyer belt over, Sasha was busy zipping her little folder full of charging cables and battery banks back into her backpack. Taking a deep breath, Ruby grabbed her boots out of another tray and walked over to touch Sasha on the shoulder. “I’ll get your sneakers, hon.”

“Hon?” Sasha went pink, which was too cute for words. Ruby loved how flustered her friend kept getting when she tried out her little couple-ish tricks on her. With a wink, she snatched Sasha’s beat up black sneakers and went to find a bench so they could put their shoes back on.

She was zipping her second boot on when Sasha padded over in her sock feet and dropped her backpack on the bench. Ruby peered up through her bangs as Sasha sat down. The woman was still flushed faintly pink a full minute and a half later. Ruby ducked her head back down to adjust her boot laces and to hide her grin.

This almost,almostmade up for how she was still blushing at the sight of a motorcycle...

Well, that wasn't Sasha's fault, exactly. And Ruby definitely had never mentioned a singlebreathof her orgasmic afternoon on the back of Sasha's Kawasaki. Never even mind the hours of pleasure she'd derived from her Hitachi at home afterward.

All hail the geniuses of Japanese technology,she thought now, and was immediately glad that she'd decided to wear her long hair down today, as her face burned hot as a tea kettle going full boil.

Next to her, Sasha was busily tying her own shoelaces. "Our boarding passes say our gate is 43."

"Good. That's not at the very far end of the terminal, it's pretty close to this end, actually." Ruby took slow breaths, still feeling a bit warm. When she lifted her head, she hoped that any residual redness could be attributed to bending over and putting shoes on. She put on a bright smile. "Ooh, and there's a bookstore next to it."

"Do you need more books?" Sasha stood up and held out a hand to help Ruby up.

Ruby tsked. "What kind of question is that to ask an author? And an author you're supposed to be dating! I'm going to forget you even said such a ridiculous thing. Of course, I always need more books."

"Point taken. All right, sweetheart. Let me make it up to you, I'll buy you a book myself. Any book you want." Sasha winked and started off down the concourse. She still held Ruby's hand,so Ruby had no choice but to tag along.Sweetheart?A riot of butterflies began to dance in her stomach.

It had been so long since anyone had called her any kind of pet name. Or held her

hand. And nobody had ever held her hand to walk through an airport or offered to buy her an overpriced airport paperback. A girl could get used to this.

She shouldn't, but she could.

Ruby's hand in hers was warm, and Sasha was dying on the inside at the feel of it, and amazed at how smoothly she'd managed to toss off that sweetheart. The casual little touches that made their relationship feel real seemed to come easily to Ruby, enviably so. Getting sweetheart through her teeth felt like a miracle.

Altogether, Sasha was pretty sure she was coming off way more smoothly than she actually felt, and that also felt like a miracle. Although in reality, it was just that Sasha had a lifetime of practice at suppressing her feelings and putting on a great act. "Minnesota nice" was a real thing, after all.

She walked on, squeezing Ruby's hand. Their gate was indeed quite close to the TSA screening area, and the bookstore was right next door. Playfully, she pulled Ruby in after her and pushed her forward as if they were dancing. "M'lady. All the books your heart could desire."

"It's no Powell's, but it'll do." Ruby freed her hand to go darting forward to the romance section, and Sasha flexed her fingers. They already felt empty. What was she going to do when this whole movie plot of a week was over and she couldn't hold Ruby's hand again?

Better to get in all the handholding she could. And if not hands, then other touchy-feely girlfriendy things. Sasha drew her shoulders back, adjusted her backpack straps, and stepped up to join Ruby at the romances. It looked like Ruby wanted her hands free so she could pull books down and flip through them, so Sasha just touched her lower back. Her shining reward was a sweet, happy smile tossed over Ruby's shoulder before she went back to the book in her hands.

Nope, nope, nope. It was too much, actually. Maybe she needed to do this in small doses. “Hey, you browse, I’ll go next door and get us some overpriced snacks. Cheez-Its and a Diet Coke?”

“You know me so well.” Ruby looked up from the book she was thumbing through. “Can I have a pack of Twizzlers, too?”

“You got it.” With a salute, Sasha backed off and fled to the little newsstand and snack shop next door. I can do this. I can do this. I can totally, totally do this. Slowly.

She ignored the little voice that wanted to remind her that time was of the essence and that slow wasn’t really an option anymore.

6

“I, Declan MacIntyre, Lord of Inverary and Auchnabreac, do take thee, Nicola Abercrombie of Kinloch, as me bride and me lady.” At the sound of the sweet words in the low rumble of Declan’s gravelly voice, Nicola’s knees went weak.

But it was her turn. “I, Nicola of Kinloch, do take thee, Declan of Inverary and Auchna...” She stumbled over the Scottish place name as she always did, but Declan only smiled softly at her and nodded to encourage her to try again. “Auchnabreac, as my husband and my lord.”

They’d crept out of her room in the night to get to a decrepit hermit’s cottage deep in the dark woods of the Kinloch Estate. “Marry me, Nicola,” Declan had commanded. “Here and now, handfast to me with Auld Alasdair, your father canna do anything about it if we join.”

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“Is it real?” she’d breathed, gazing into his dark eyes under the light of a small lantern. “Would it be a real marriage?”

“Aye, real enough, lass, real enough in the eyes of God and the law...”

And so, they’d entered the cottage, where Auld Alisdair had been sat waiting for them, looked as if he’d been sat there for hundreds of years. Shakily, Nicola watched the grizzled hermit now as he wrapped a rough strip of tartan cloth around their joined hands. “I, Alisdair of Klininver, join ye two as one under the eye of God?”

The door burst open. “Nicola!” James Abercrombie’s voice boomed around the dusty, ivy-covered peat walls of the cottage.

“Father!” Panicked, she looked between Declan and Alisdair. Had they completed the ceremony? Was it too late for her father to interrupt them?

“I can’t believe I bought you a book, but you’re writing?” Sasha craned her neck to peer at Ruby’s laptop screen.

“I have a routine for these flights home,” Ruby said, pulling off her headphones and elbowing her companion gently in the ribs. “Two hours of work, then lunch and an hour nap, then reading the rest of the way as a reward. Don’t interrupt me, I’m on a roll.”

“But it’s almost been two hours anyway, and look.” Sasha pointed into the aisle, where the flight attendants were drawing up with their food and beverage carts.

“Lunch.”

Ruby looked at her phone, where the alarm she had set was showing that it would be going off in a minute. She canceled it and closed her laptop. “Oh.”

Sasha flashed her a quick grin and turned towards the flight attendant. “A ginger ale for me and a Diet Coke for my partner, please.”

“Vegetarian or roasted chicken sandwich?” the flight attendant asked.

“One of each, we’ll share.” As she turned to Ruby, Sasha pushed her curls back from her face, a gesture Ruby was familiar with as one of Sash’s nervous tics. Sure enough, the hair push was followed quickly by an apologetic grin. “I thought we could split them. If that’s all right?”

“It’s fine, Sash. Thank you.” Ruby busied herself with putting away her laptop and headphones, deep in thought.

She liked to think of herself as an independent person. As in, to the point of ferocity independent. It was why she’d moved so far across the country to go to college, why she’d chosen to stay instead of going back to New York. So normally, she’d bristle at anyone ordering for her.

But there was something comforting and correct if it was Sasha doing it. Partly it was that she trusted Sasha’s food judgment implicitly, and they’d been friends long enough that she knew Sasha knew what she’d like.

Today, though, Sasha wasn’t only ordering for her. She’d done it specifically so they could share their lunches. And she’d looked out for Ruby, without even knowing it was time for Ruby to stop writing and eat. In Ruby’s bag, there was a copy of a new Casey McQuiston novel and half a pack of Twizzlers that Sasha had bought for her.

She felt protected. Looked after. No one she’d dated previously had ever done that.

Certainly, Awful Antonia, as Esme had dubbed her, had done exactly the opposite of making Ruby feel safe and loved. With Sasha over the last couple of months, as they crafted their fairytale love story, Ruby had felt nothing but content and comfortable any time she was with Sasha, even during the motorcycle incident that still made her blush.

If it's not like this, I don't want it, it's an act, Ruby thought, and was surprised at how strongly she felt it. This ersatz love affair with Sasha was shaping up to be the blueprint for exactly what she wanted in a relationship. To feel like a loved and cherished partner, worth protecting, with someone who knew Ruby inside and out and had no intention of using any of it against her.

"Rubes?" Sasha tapped her on the shoulder and held out a sandwich package with the two sandwich halves. "I split them up. And here, I mixed the crackers and pretzels too."

"Oh! Thanks." Ruby couldn't keep herself from smiling like she'd just been given the best Christmas gift. It was so silly, it was just some subpar airline sandwiches and snacks, but somehow it felt special because Sasha had made decisions with Ruby in mind. For Ruby. For both of them, together, as a partnership.

Yes, this is what I want when I find The One, Ruby decided as she munched on her faintly soggy egg salad sandwich. I want it to be just like this, with whoever it is.

"There." Sasha dropped her beat up wheeled duffel bag next to Ruby's feet and glanced around the baggage carousel. "I see your bag. I've got it."

Without another word, Sasha jogged alongside the carousel to pick up Ruby's shiny purple hard-sided suitcase. She needed one last moment to herself after that plane ride and before they met up with Ruby's family. To collect herself after Ruby had napped, head on Sasha's shoulder, her spicy floral perfume and fresh citrusy shampoo filling

Sasha's nostrils and making it impossible for Sasha to nap herself.

As Ruby had slept, Sasha had allowed herself to pick up Ruby's hand and hold it. To her surprise, Ruby slept like alogon an airplane.

Things were too real already. Meeting Ruby's family was just going to mix her up even more, she was sure. Being in Ruby's childhood home...

A thought occurred to Sasha and stopped her in her tracks just as she pulled Ruby's bag off of the belt. Icy cold water flooded her veins.

"Sash?" Ruby called.

That snapped her out of her freeze. Wrapping her fingers more tightly around the handle of Ruby's case, Sasha turned around and all but sprinted back and skidded to a stop. Ruby's eyes were huge blue pools of surprise. "Sash? What the hell?"

"Bed," Sasha rasped out. "Sleep. We never talked about sleeping arrangements at your mom's house! Are we going to have to share a bed?" She wasn't sure she could handle that for an entire week. Pressed up next to Ruby in a little bed, feeling her soft skin and smelling her fresh post-shower scent every night... no, that might undo Sasha entirely. She swallowed hard.

To her shock, Ruby tossed her head back and laughed. "Why are you freaking out?" she asked, her eyes gleaming with mirth. "My mother is Catholic, Sash. We're not married. No way is she putting us in the same room. You'll probably be on a pullout down in the basement rec room." She looped her arm through Sasha's and dragged her towards the airport exit. "Bonus, you get your own bathroom, my dad and brothers spent a whole summer putting an entire en suite and a kitchenette down there. Sure, it was so they could watch Giants games on the big screen and have snacks and bathroom access without missing more than two minutes of the action, but

it sure does come in clutch when we have guests coming.” She paused. “You may have to share the room with a few of the kiddies. Or aunties. But everyone gets their own bed.”

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“Well, now I don’t know what I’d prefer.” Ruby’s irrepressible cheer, which was growing by the moment the closer they got to meeting her family at the pick-up lot, was starting to rub off on Sasha. And she felt a little calmer now that she knew they wouldn’t be expected to share a bed. Their little PDA practices today had been disruptive enough to her fragile nerves.

She felt like she was holding her breath the whole time they were on the AirTrain to the pick-up lot. What should Sasha expect? Her family was small, just herself and her mother, and her mother never met her at the Minneapolis airport. Sasha had to rent a car and drive the two and a half hours to Duluth, where she’d be greeted with a hug and a hotdish. Maybe her Aunt Amy and Uncle Pete would be visiting from Silver Bay, maybe not. Home visits, for Sasha, were very low key.

She’d accompanied Ruby to LAX to pick up Daniel and Angela a few times. That had always been a rambunctious squeal-fest, lots of hugs and jumping up and down. Was today’s meeting going to be that but on steroids? Sasha had a sneaking suspicion that it would be. And while she didn’t mind when Daniel and Angie dragged her into a family hug, how would she feel if it were five dozen Fierellis doing it?

Well, surely it wouldn’t be that many. But it would be a couple of carloads full, Ruby had told her. Daniel and Angie would be there, so that would be nice. But Mama Fierelli would be there, and Sasha had no idea what she was like. “Typical Italian Catholic mom,” Ruby had told her, but what did that mean? She’d had a whole dossier on Ruby’s family, but she knew perfectly well that facts paled next to actual experience.

“Lefferts Boulevard Station,” came the overhead announcement, and just like that, all

of Sasha's time to try and anticipate what was coming ran right out. She sucked in a deep breath and followed Ruby off of the train.

Ambush.

It was the only way to describe what happened. There were balloons, big shiny ones, bunches of little colorful ones. Signs, Sharpie on posterboard, lots of hearts and stars and Welcome Home Ruby written in big puffy letters. And shrieking, and hugging, and?—

Sasha felt her suitcase taken from her hand, and she was pulled aside. To her relief, it was Daniel's friendly, smiling blue eyes from behind glasses as heavy and black as Ruby's that greeted her. "Sash. I'm so glad it's you she brought."

"I'm so glad it's you who found me in this crowd." She threw her arms around him in a quick, grateful hug, then pulled back to look him over. "Look at you, Mister Almost Married! Where's the blushing bride?"

"Back at the homestead helping Rosie and Aunt Cee put the finishing touches on a big family dinner. Hope you're in the mood for lasa—oop."

Daniel stumbled after getting a hipcheck from a short, dark haired woman with Ruby's eyes and sunshine smile. "Is this her? Sasha? I'm Mama Elena. Lemme get a look at my girl's girl."

Sasha froze as two strong hands gripped her biceps and laser-like blue eyes saw so deeply into her. Elena Fierelli tilted her head and gave one sharp nod. "You look like a nice girl. Are you?"

How to answer that? "I'm from Minnesota..."

“Oh, yeah. You’ll be a nice girl. Good. You like to eat?”

“I’m a chef.”

“That’s right. Dom, you hear that? Our Ruby brought us a chef.” Elena’s smile was truly radiant as she ushered Sasha to a big black Chevy Suburban. “Finally, someone who appreciates food other than pizza. And maybe you can help us out this week? Lots of meals to make for lots of people, we can use the extra hands.”

“Anything you want,” Sasha stammered as she was handed up into the middle row of the SUV, followed by a giggly Ruby. The doors were closed around them and she had a split second to say, “I was unprepared.”

“Sorry,” Ruby chortled. “I really don’t know how to fully explain my family. But you’ve heard me talk about them for years! This couldn’t have been a total surprise.”

“True. True. And yet somehow...” Sasha shook her head, but there was no more time for discussion. Doors opened and the vehicle filled up with Fierellis. Daniel slipped in past them to the back seat, followed by a pair of taller versions of him that had to be the twins, Dom Junior and Dante. Mama Elena climbed into the front passenger seat and immediately twisted around with happiness all over her face.

“Sasha, you haven’t met Ruby’s father yet,” she announced as the driver’s side door open and a tall, broad-shouldered man with gunmetal gray hair and an amiable face wedged himself behind the steering wheel.

He looked into the rearview mirror and waved. “Sasha, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Dom Senior, you can call me Papa Dom, everyone does.”

“Nice to meet you, Papa Dom.” Sasha managed to get out.

“I’m Dom Junior,” volunteered one of the twins from the back seat.

“Dante,” said the other.

“You already know me, Sash.” Daniel. Without looking, Sasha could tell he was swapping grins with Ruby as they both delighted in her overwhelm.

“Buckle up, everybody. We got a long drive ahead of us. At least there’s gonna be a great dinner at the end of it.” Ruby’s mother flashed one more sunshine smile before she turned to face forward. “Sasha, you can tell us all about yourself, don’t leave anything out!”

Sasha thought she might leave out one fact: that she desperately wished she knew how to phase through a car seat and disappear.

“I made the bed this morning, fresh clean sheets, no scent detergent just like you like, Ruby baby.” Her mother squeezed her around her waist, and Ruby tried not to wince at the firmness of the grip. Thanks to years of teaching Pilates to Staten Island PTA mommies, Elena Fierelli had arm strength that would make a Marine cry—and had at least once, as she recalled.

She hugged her mother back, considerably more gently. “Thank you, Mama. I love how you still haven’t changed anything in here. You know you can get rid of the Fall Out Boy posters any time you want?”

Sasha was looking around the room in amazement, her jaw fully dropped. “It’s like a time capsule. And why is it so pink? Wait, are those prom pictures stuck to the mirror? From the prom?” She almost sprinted over to Ruby’s cluttered vanity, pushing ancient bottles of black Wet N Wild nail polish out of the way to peer at the Polaroids.

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Elena had one hand over her heart and a sentimental look on her face. “Oh, Ruby Margarita, my love. I never thought I’d see the day when you’d bring someone home with you.”

“Well, you know, every pot has a lid or whatever it was you used to tell me.” Ruby shoved her hands into the pockets of the long black skirt she liked to wear for traveling. She hadn’t expected her mother to basically fall in love with Sasha right off the bat. Elena would like Sasha, of course, Ruby had known they’d get along once Elena had satisfied her curiosity and Sasha had mostly gotten over her shyness and discomfort.

But Elena had obviously decided Sasha was a natural Fierelli in the hour-long drive from JFK and had a clear cut case of heart eyes as she watched Sasha prowling around Ruby’s bedroom. For the first time since they’d first started this little fake dating escapade, a cold finger of doubt touched Ruby’s heart. Everything had seemed like it would be so easy to set up and take back down when it was on paper, but... maybe... maybe she’d underestimated a lot of things.

Before she could think of what to say next, the bedroom door opened. Daniel, Dom Junior and Dante came in with their bags. “Ma, Rosie says dinner’s ready in ten,” Dante volunteered.

Ruby frowned. “Is someone going to help us take Sash’s bag back down to the basement? Why’d you bring it all the way up here?”

“Because Ma told us to,” Dante answered, and all of her brothers and her mother looked at her like she was crazy.

“I can take it down when you show me my room, Mama Elena,” Sasha offered quietly, cheeks pink.

Elena stared at both of them. “You’re in your room, girls.”

Um? Ruby felt her eyebrows just about to take flight. “We what now?”

Sasha looked panicked. “Ruby said we’d be separated, we’re not married.”

“Oh, once upon a time, sure. I’ve been doing a lot of work the last few years, though.” Elena beamed.

“Also Danny and Angie just invited way too many people who needed a place to stay, and the basement is full of kiddies,” Dom Junior said. “Ma can’t turn anyone away, so some of that work she’s been doing has been in the last week.”

“Domenic Michael Fierelli, you shut your mouth. All of you, out, get out.” Elena flapped her arms to shoo all of the men towards the door. She looked back over her shoulder at Ruby and Sasha. “Ruby, my love, you know where the bathroom is. You two get cleaned up before dinner. I’ll give you a little extra time—take fifteen, freshen up, and come down to help set the tables.”

“Sure, Ma,” Ruby choked out, absolutely on the verge of losing her mind over the last two minutes. She managed to hold herself together until the door clicked shut behind everyone and she heard footsteps going down the stairs. Then her legs gave out and she sat down on her pink, carpeted floor.

Sasha had her hands tangled up in her hair. “She’s letting us share a room? Abed?”

“Sash, I swear to God, hand on heart, I thought for sure she was going to put you downstairs. I promise, she never breathed a word of this to me on any of the phone

calls.”

“This is a lot to take in.” Sasha looked super stressed, and Ruby’s feelings were starting to get hurt.

“I don’t think I’m all that bad to sleep next to,” she said, twisting her fingers into her skirt.

Sasha looked horrified. “Oh, God, Rubes! Of course you’re not. I don’t... I’m sorry. It’s been a long day and I feel like a lot has happened in the last hour. I’m having to adjust to more than I expected.”

As always, she knew Sasha meant it, and of course Ruby knew that Sasha hadn’t even intended to hurt her feelings at all. But she did wonder why the idea of them sharing a bed seemed to be difficult, despite Sasha’s apology. “If it helps, I don’t snore.”

“No, Ruby, no, it’s nothing to do with you, really. I just, um. I’m just used to sleeping alone after so many years of single-hood.” Somehow, Sasha looked sincere but also... a little cagey? It felt like she wasn’t telling the whole truth.

But Ruby was tired and hungry and overwhelmed herself. She had a lot to cope with, realizing how deep she was getting herself and her family into this deception, when all she’d wanted was to keep them off her back for the week. Now wasn’t the time to pry at Sasha. She held her hands up and wiggled her fingers. “OK. Help me up? Let’s go wash our hands and get some dinner.”

Sasha pulled her to her feet. “Fantastic idea. But first...” She walked over to the little pink and white bench by the bedroom window, which was piled high with spare pillows. Selecting a frilly pink velvet and lace bolster, she plopped it down onto the bed as a divider. “I don’t want to be accidentally treating you like a stuffed animal in

the night.”

“It just occurred to me that I might try to yank you in like I do with Winston, so that’s probably a good idea,” Ruby admitted.

“Also...” Sasha looked sheepish and she shoved her hands into the back pocket of her cargo pants. “Rubes, listen. Is there a drugstore nearby or something?”

“Um, there’s a CVS up the road. We can go after dinner, they’re open till ten.”

“Great. I need some earplugs.” Sasha rocked back on her heels. “Um, the thing is, honestly, it’s cute as hell, but you do actually snore a little, you were doing it today on the plane...”

“Oh myGod,” Ruby cried out, and buried her face in her hands.

This was going to be such a long week.

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“Ange, ohmygooooooood.” Ruby’s hands flew to her cheeks when Angela emerged from the fitting room at Bella Moda Bridal, the very picture of a blushing princess of a bride. Next to her, Angela’s mother, Concetta, burst into tears, along with Elena and Angela’s college best friend, Kate, who was the maid of honor.

Ruby felt tears welling up in her eyes herself. With the ten-year age gap between herself and Surprise Baby Daniel, she’d basically helped raise him with her mother. Now he was getting married to a young woman Ruby had met when she was still a babyfaced college freshman with braces, who was now standing before her in a full-on sparkling white Cinderella ballgown, strawberry blonde hair gently pinned up under a softly frothy tulle veil. It was all so real now that Angela was getting her final fitting for her gown, and Daniel was up the street at Stein’s Fine Suits having the cuffs of his trousers turned up one last scant quarter inch.

Not to mention her own gown as Daniel’s Best Gal. His three groomsmen were wearing black trousers and suit jackets the deep maroon-ish color of Angela’s favorite roses. Ruby had been offered the suit option, but she just liked dresses better, and both Daniel and Angela were fine with that. So, she and Kate were wearing matching gowns, full maroon satin skirts with a wide black velvet wrap top to coordinate with the men in an inverse way. The three bridesmaids were in the same gown but all maroon. It was all very dramatic and romantic, everyone looked like the rosebuds that would be festooning the church and the reception hall.

Ruby loved it all, the pageantry and elegance and lush romance of everything. They’d been in New York for two days now, and it had been a nonstop whirlwind of love and joy all centered around Angela and Daniel. She truly felt like she was watching a rom com coming to life.

Speaking of rom coms...Ruby glanced over at Sasha, who was standing and fidgeting by the accessories counter. She'd tried to beg out of coming to the final dress fittings, insisting that she'd be fine at the house helping Rose and Cecelia put together the evening meal as she'd done each night since they'd arrived. But Elena had overridden her entirely, insisting that she come see Ruby try on her gown. "You telling me you don't want to see your girlfriend looking like a princess? C'mon, Sasha. Don't give me that. Get in the car."

Sasha had tried to lock eyes with Ruby for help, but Ruby wanted her there, too. She didn't know Kate at all, Angela was absorbed in making sure her dress was perfect, and The Mothers... well, they were certainly mothering. Ruby wanted someone sane at the dress shop with her, just in case.

She walked over to Sasha now, carefully holding the voluminous skirt up off of the immaculate marble floor of the dress shop. "What do you think?"

Sasha's cheeks were faintly rosy. "You look great, of course. But how are you managing in heels?"

Ruby stuck one black satin pump-clad foot out from under the frills of black tulle petticoats and maroon satin. "They can barely be classified as heels. Angela knows the whole story about prom night and wants no part of potentially recreating the disaster."

"No ambulances at my wedding," Angela called out from the platform in front of the three-way mirror. "Who's gonna see their feet anyway?"

"I, for one, am grateful," Kate chimed in from where she was primping her glorious head of glossy black curls in another mirror. "I'm already nearly six feet tall in my bare damn feet. If Ruby weren't in the wedding party, I know Angela would have me wedged into five-inch stilettos."

“I would not! Even though you look great in them... no, on my wedding day I’m fine with you being as close to short as we can get you.” Angela grinned and tossed her veil back over her shoulder. “Why’s my bestie got to be a frickin’ supermodel?”

“I’m just glad we’ll be across the aisle from each other and that I don’t have to stand next to Kate,” Ruby whispered to Sasha. “I mean, I’m 5’4, and with this red hair, I’d look like a fire hydrant.”

“You wouldneverlook like a fire hydrant,” Sasha insisted. “No matter how tall the person next to you is.”

They both looked at Kate, who was having to bend nearly double to hug tiny, elfin Angela. “What do you think it’s like, never having to stand on a chair to reach the top shelf?” Ruby asked, tilting her head to regard Kate with amazement. “Or, no, wait, not just the top shelf, but that weird little cabinet over the top of every refrigerator in every home I’ve ever seen. She can put things in thereand get them out again.”

“She can dust the ceiling fan without having to get one of those special long dusters,” Sasha replied, shaking her head.

“I have to squat in every shower and it’s torture riding in Angela’s stupid little Prius,” Kate called across the bridal salon, sticking her tongue out and grinning.

“Noted!” Ruby called back, laughing.

They were all out of their dresses and climbing back into their street clothes when Elena let out a horrific shriek. “I’ll kill her! I willkill my sister-in-law.”

Ruby ran out of the dressing room, still yanking her black sweater over her head. She pulled her ponytail out of the neck as she skidded to a stop next to her mother, who was jabbing at her mobile phone with a violence not seen since she’d been beaten for

Mom of the Year at St. Clair's School for Girls. "Are you okay? What'd Aunt Cee do?"

"Not Cecelia," Elena hissed. "Beth."

Ruby's eyes went round. "Oh, damn."

"Who's Beth?" Sasha asked, sidling up with curiosity all over her face.

"My Uncle Leo's second wife." Ruby looked over her mother's shoulder to read the messages that had set her off. She let out a low whistle as she realized what had happened. "Did she seriously message you to say she's invited both of her kids and their families to tag along to dinner tonight?"

"I will kill her," Elena growled, sending back a short, polite message that utterly belied her fury. "We didn't plan for ten extra people! Rose and Cee are going to mutiny, they were on the verge as it was this morning when I asked them if they could bake a couple cheesecakes."

"That was a shocking amount of gall, even for you." Ruby ducked the swat her mother aimed at the back of her head. "We can get through this, though, right? Maybe pick up something from a restaurant?"

Sasha had a thoughtful look on her face. "We don't even need to do that. Remind me of the menu tonight?"

"Baked chicken casserole, mashed potatoes, a big salad, and rolls," Elena rattled off. "And the cheesecakes. Rose and Cee are stretched to the bone as it is making enough of that to feed nearly thirty people. It's five PM! Dinner's in two hours, I can't ask them to make more, as if there was any room in the kitchen to cook anything else." She sighed and rubbed her head. "I can pick up a couple of rotisserie chickens and a

tub of potatoes from a deli, but that witch will know they're from a deli. I can hear her snide cracks now."

"You're not going to do that. You've got a grill on the back porch, right? And a blender somewhere?" Sasha had her phone out and was making a list. "Rubes, have Daniel come pick us up, we've got some shopping to do. Mama Elena, can you get home and get the grill ready? Angela, is it okay if I kidnap your fiancé?"

Angela was pulling on her Chelsea boots. "No problem. Mama can drive me and Kate to the Fierrellicasa. Do you want us to pick up anything on the way?"

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“No, I’ve got it.” Sasha shoved her phone in her pocket and grabbed Ruby’s hand. Let’s go, is Daniel coming?”

“ETA two minutes. What are we doing?”

“What I do best on a busy Saturday night at the Lounge.” Sasha winked. “Pull rabbits out of hats and make miracles out of thin air.”

“Can you? With just a propane grill on my parents’ ‘ back porch?” Ruby wondered, scrambling to follow Sasha down the sidewalk to meet Daniel’s approaching car. “I’m not doubting you, I just need help to see the vision.”

“Oh, I’ll show you my vision.” Sasha flashed a grin and a wink that, to Ruby’s surprise, sent a thrill through her. She knew Sasha was never any more confident than when she was doing something kitchen-related, but she hadn’t realized how... appealing that confidence was.

But before she had time to think about it, they were in Daniel’s car embarking on a grocery shopping spree like she’d never been on before.

Two hours later, as she wedged a tureen full of roasted red pepper soup in between her mother’s big salad bowl and a plate heaped high with Sasha’s special Mediterranean grilled lamb and vegetable skewers, Ruby watched her mother throw her arms around Sasha, who set down her pan of plump foil-wrapped sweet potatoes just in time. “You are a lifesaver, Sasha,” Elena breathed, gratitude shining from her face. “Ruby, my darling, if you don’t keep this one...”

“Sasha’ll be in my life forever,” Ruby promised her mother.

It wasn’t a lie, but as her eyes met Sasha’s over the groaning dining room table, Ruby felt a fog of indefinable questions beginning to stir at the back of her mind. Questions she simply did not have the capacity to face and define right now.

They just had to get through this week. She’d figure out the rest later.

“Incoming!” Dom Junior shouted as he weaved through the dancing crowd surrounding their VIP booth at Crystalline. Sasha reached back over the booth and took the tray of champagne flutes from him, setting it carefully on the table to the sounds of cheers from their party.

The Manhattan nightclub, which specialized in different types of champagne and sparkling wines, seemed to Sasha to be an odd place for a joint bachelor/bachelorette party. It wasn’t warm and inviting—it was a dark, moody cave with icy blue neon lights and fixtures that were carved to look like Art Deco ice sculptures. The music was almost too loud to talk overcomfortably and any non-sparkling cocktails they’d ordered had been watery and basic.

Daniel and Angela seemed to be having a politely nice time, but Sasha got the distinct impression they’d have much preferred to have their joint party at something like a bowling alley or Dave & Busters, where everyone could play games and laugh together. The two of them weren’t exactly homebodies, but when they came to LA to visit Ruby, they’d always asked to go to restaurants and bars with warm, friendly vibes. Crystalline had been arranged by Kate weeks ago, as the maid of honor. Ruby, not being in New York to get a feel for the place, hadn’t felt she could object, and Sasha knew Daniel and Angela hadn’t said anything either.

So, it wasn’t the most fun party Sasha had ever been to, but at least the champagne choices were decent. She sipped at her newest flute, something sweetly bubbly, not

too dry. It was nice.

Next to her, Ruby leaned her head on Sasha's shoulder and sighed quietly. "This is kind of a drag," she whispered.

"No, drag would be an improvement," Sasha joked back in a whisper, and they both giggled.

"What are you two laughing about over there?" Kate called, a puckish smile on her pretty face. She was perched in the lap of one of Daniel's groomsmen, swirling her champagne flute around between sips.

"Inside joke," Ruby quipped, raising her own glass in a salute.

Seated in the slightly elevated place of honor at one end of the oblong booth, Angela shot back her entire glass of champagne and stood up, her satin Bride to Be sash crumpled and plastic rhinestone tiara askew. "Katie-bug, I love you, but this is not doing it for me. Did you have other plans for the night?"

"Sit back down," Kate commanded. Setting her flute down, she raised one graceful hand and gave an imperious wave. A bartender materialized out of nowhere and waited. "Two rounds of tequila shots, top shelf, please. Put it on the tab for Katherine Lindholm." She leaned forward, mischief sparkling in her eyes.

Dom Junior, arm wrapped around his wife Arianna, huffed in annoyance. "We could have had someone bringing us drinks this whole time? I didn't have to fight my way to the bar and defend my tray of drinks on three separate occasions?"

"It's a perk of being me, I'm afraid," Kate said with a smile. She wriggled around in the lap of the groomsman—Sasha couldn't remember his name—who looked equal parts delighted and deeply uncomfortable. With a flourish, she pulled out the tote bag

that she'd brought with her, which Sasha had thought an odd choice for a glamorous model on a night out, until she'd handed sashes and crowns to the happy couple. But it seemed her Mary Poppins bag of tricks wasn't empty yet.

After a quick rummage in the bag, Kate set a pair of boxes down amongst the empty champagne flutes. One was pink and black, the other black and white. Ruby's sister Rose leaned over to peer at it. "Dares For Bachelors and Bachelorettes," she read, her brow furrowing. "Oh, come on, Kate. This isn't inappropriate, is it?"

"Of course it is, Rosie!" Kate beamed. "Don't worry, I went through it, there's nothing really gross in there. But you are going to have to get out of your comfort zone."

Rose, who Sasha thought was very nice but also didn't seem to have ever been out of her comfort zone in her entire forty years of life on Earth, sat back with a worried look on her face as her husband Jim rubbed her shoulder reassuringly. "It'll be okay, Rosie. It's fun, we won't take it too seriously."

"Exactly." Kate grinned and opened up the boxes. "Now, I'll kick things off to break the ice, then we'll go around the table. You'll each draw a card from the appropriate box and you have to do what it says!" She took a shot of tequila and then reached into the pink box and grabbed the stack of cards, giving them a good shuffle. Then she peeled the top one off and waved it around, giggling. Before she could read it aloud to the party, however, the groomsman in whose lap she was sitting snatched it out of her hand. "Philip!"

"Let's see what we've got here," Philip chuckled, dodging Kate's efforts to grab the card back from him. "Convenient! It says you have to kiss a bald man."

Kate laughed and rubbed Philip's smooth, shiny head. "I think I'm supposed to go find a bald stranger, but I guess we can make do." She lost no time twisting around in

his lap, straddling him until her little black minidress rode up her slender thighs. Sasha looked away, her face burning. Ruby was giggling again, her head buried in Sasha's shoulder.

"I hope I get a boring card, something like, you have to go take a selfie in the men's room, I don't think I can kiss a stranger," she whispered into Sasha's ear.

"I hope your sister gets a funny one, like, simple but funny like, wear your bra on the outside of your clothes or something like that," Sasha whispered back. "I like her, but I feel like that would be hilarious."

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“I don’t know if she could do it! Maybe twenty years ago... like, she definitely had fun at Coyote Ugly back in her day, the stories are legendary,” Ruby said. “But now? She’s really turned into a PTA mom, God bless her. But hey, she came out for this party, and she’s drinking, so who knows.”

Kate broke off her steamy makeout session with Philip and tossed her mane of black curls over her shoulder. “Next up,” she called, pulling her skirt down as she twisted back around to sit next to her blushing dare partner.

Dante leaned forward and pulled his card, which resulted in him standing up and belting out a rendition of Jessie J’s Price Tag that had everyone who’d been dancing around their booth cheering.

Daniel’s other groomsman, Stephen—who was a thoroughly Midwestern boy from Eau Claire, Wisconsin—had to affect a French accent and convince a pair of Jersey girls at the bar that he was actually French. He half-won the dare.

Rose drew a card that instructed her to drink a blowjob shot like she was actually giving one, and to the shock of everyone but Ruby, who muttered, “Coyote Ugly,” under her breath, she actually did it. Loudly. And in such a skillful way that there wasn’t a drop of whipped cream in her long black hair.

Her husband Jim posed like a Charlie’s Angel with two frat guys he found on the dance floor.

A bridesmaid, Lisa, was instructed to swap clothes with someone. She chose Philip, who looked fetching in his new tan bandage dress. Lisa was just delighted that the

green-striped button down and chinos she got in return didn't smell like Axe body spray but rather Tom Ford Tobacco Vanille.

Sasha was impressed with how the evening had turned around. They were having genuine fun now, not just sitting around drinking and making stilted conversation. And all of the dares had been largely just silly stunts. She relaxed into the cushions of the booth, ready for her turn to arrive.

She let down her guard too soon.

A soft gasp escaped Ruby's mouth as she drew her card and read it. Her eyes were wide, and though the icy blue lighting of Crystalline made it difficult to tell for sure, Sasha thought she might be blushing. She frowned. What ridiculous task could have gotten Ruby this flustered? Sasha leaned over to read the pink card.

Make out with someone in front of everyone like no one is watching.

A cold river of dread ran through Sasha. There was no way Ruby was going to make out with 'someone.' It would be Sasha, it could only be Sasha, because they were supposed to be dating. And this wasn't something that had been part of any of their PDA practice. The hugs, the cheek kisses, the comfortable side by side snuggles on couches, they were getting better at that. But making out? That hadn't even been on the table. Sasha's mouth went dry.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ruby swallow hard and lean forward to grab two tequila shots out of the tray. Neither of them liked tequila at all, but Sasha was not about to turn a shot of it down, not with what was written on that little card. To her surprise, however, instead of handing her one of the glasses, Ruby downed both shots, one after another, as the whole party gaped at her.

Kate raised one perfect eyebrow. "Twoshots? Just what does that little card say, Best

Gal?” She leaned over and snatched the card out of Ruby’s hand, scanning it quickly. “Ooh! Spicy. At least you’ve got a built-in dare partner right here with you, though!” She flashed a big smile at Sasha and handed her a tequila shot. “Bottoms up.”

Numbly, Sasha shot back the tequila, grimacing at the grassy taste of it. She looked over at Ruby, who was smiling nervously at her. “Rubes, we don’t?—”

“Kiss, kiss, kiss,” Dante began to chant, an excess of champagne having made him seemingly oblivious to the fact that he was cheering on his little sister to make out with another woman in front of him. Sasha closed her eyes.

Kissing Ruby was something she’d dreamed about for so long. But this scenario had never come to mind. She’d imagined something private and intimate, sweet and romantic. She had thought about how Ruby’s lips would feel, how her mouth would taste. Now, their first kiss would be in front of Ruby’s siblings and a bunch of strangers, in the middle of a too-trendy nightclub neither of them had chosen or particularly liked, and it would taste like grass and vegetables and alcohol.

A soft weight settled in her lap, arms encircled her neck, and Sasha’s eyes flew open. Ruby’s big blue eyes, for once unsheltered by her thick-rimmed glasses, were wide and apprehensive, and she was biting her lip. “OK?”

Sasha licked her lips, wishing she’d had a moment to put on lip balm, chew a mint, something. But it was too late for any of that. “OK.”

Her world narrowed to Ruby’s face getting close to hers, her eyelids fluttering shut, mascara-black lashes fanning out over her cheeks. Their noses touched, slipped past each other, and then Ruby’s lips met Sasha’s just as Sasha closed her eyes.

Fireworks.

On the back of Sasha's eyelids, golden sparkles and red explosions were going off as Ruby's soft, warm lips parted, her tongue flicking out to trace along Sasha's bottom lip. Sasha let her mouth fall open, let Ruby's tongue in to explore. She felt Ruby's hands move to slip up the back of her neck, into the short bristle of her hair, cupping the back of her head.

Sasha's hands were at Ruby's waist, and she twisted her fingers into the fabric there, soft stretch cotton winding around her fingertips as she pulled. She pulled a harsh breath in through her nose as Ruby's kiss deepened, becoming more demanding. All of the noise of the club around them melted away into a gentle fog of static, Sasha could only really hear Ruby's soft little whimpers and hitching breaths, the tiny ticking sounds of the hot, wet kisses. Ruby's hands on the back of her head were strong and confident, and the thick curtain of her long red hair fell all around them, tickling Sasha's arms.

She was utterly lost and absorbed in the kiss, and didn't think twice about letting her hand slide up under Ruby's top, to glide along the soft warmth of the skin there?—

Ruby jerked back then, breaking the kiss off and staring at Sasha with an unreadable expression.

“Well,” Kate said, clearing her throat. “Thank you for the show, ladies.”

Without a word or smile or anything to give Sasha any idea of what she was thinking, Ruby slipped out of her lap and back into her seat in the booth, her face almost a mask. Only a smudge of lipstick at the corner of her mouth reflected anything of what had just gone on. Sasha touched her own lips, wondering if they were tinted with remnants of Ruby's crimson lip paint.

Around them, everyone was joking a little uncomfortably, and nobody seemed inclined to pick a card and resume the game. The night, possibly, was drawing to a

close after their little show. Sasha squirmed in her seat, unsure if that's what she wanted or not. Because going back to the Fierelli house and sharing that bed with Ruby, even with the bolster between them, that was just not going to be the same anymore, not like it had been the last few nights.

Something... everything had just changed. She knew it had. And she had no idea where things would or could possibly go from here, but she had a sinking feeling she might have just let herself in for a world of hurt.

Ruby had let her mouth and brain function on autopilot for the last hour or so of the party. She was focused on that kiss, absolutely lost in the intoxicating memory of it.

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Never, not even during her very first kiss, had any kiss ever felt like that. Sparks, crackles and fireworks had shot through her at the first touch of her lips to Sasha's, and it had taken everything she had to not absolutely melt into the kiss and let it take her wherever it went. Only knowing that all of her siblings were there and watching—ew—had kept her tethered to the world around her.

The kiss was everything she had ever written about, read about, or seen in movies. The quicksilver thrill, the warmth radiating from her heart with each beat, the butterflies taking flight—oh, she'd felt it all in that single heavenly minute.

And all she could think about for the rest of the night, in the club, on the train and Uber rides home, sitting next to Sasha the whole time, oh, all she could think about was chasing that delicious high again. Just like she had that afternoon on the motorcycle.

Without words, she'd indicated she wanted to get ready for bed first, and Sasha had nodded. Ruby rushed through her nighttime routine, washing off all of her makeup, brushing her teeth and using mouthwash—to hell with flossing, though—moisturizing, braiding her hair out of the way. After a moment of thought, however, she took the braid down.

With what she had in mind, she wanted her hair down.

Now she was tucked up in her teenage bed, wearing loose cotton capri pants and a skimpy tank top, hair falling around her shoulders, and she was plotting.

Was this what it was like to be the lead in a romance novel? There was desire, and

fizzing excitement, and something that Ruby was very, very tempted to describe as yearning.

For Sasha. Her best friend. In all the years they'd known each other, she'd never felt like this about Sasha. Or was it that she'd never allowed herself to?

Ruby had written thousands of words about love and romance and relationships. A few days ago, she would have gleefully proclaimed herself an expert on the topic. Bullshit, she thought now. An actual expert might have a flippant self-awareness, whereas Ruby? Ruby clearly knew nothing, not of love, not of herself, not a thing.

She did know that she wanted more of whatever this was.

The bedroom door creaked open and Sasha slipped through, closing it behind her. She was in her battered old Melissa Etheridge tour t-shirt and a pair of baggy boxer shorts, just as she'd been all week. There was a new uncertainty in her eyes, though, as she lifted her head to look at Ruby.

Ruby patted the pink bolster. "C'mere, Sash."

Warily, Sasha stepped over to the bed and climbed in under the layers of warm, cozy blankets. They both slid down to face each other across the bolster. "So," Sasha began, but Ruby reached over and placed a finger over her lips.

"No talking," she whispered, and then she turned off the bedside lamp that was the only illumination in the little room.

Ruby groped in the dark across the bolster—she didn't want to remove it from between them, that felt like a line she wasn't ready to cross—and slid an arm around Sasha's waist, pulling her in as close as possible, given the pillow. Lifting herself up

slightly, she leaned over and went in for a kiss.

A tiny noise of surprise erupted from Sasha's mouth, quickly muffled by Ruby's. Her hair tumbled down around them and she hoped beyond hope that...

Sasha's hands slid up into her hair and gripped two handfuls at the nape of Ruby's neck. Ruby broke the kiss off to allow a guttural fuck to escape.

Goddamn, but she had always loved having her hair pulled.

Sasha kept one hand firmly in Ruby's hair, and the other began to drift southward as Ruby dove back in for an ever-deepening kiss. Gasps and hitching breaths were traded between them, and when Sasha's hand crept up under Ruby's tank top, this time, Ruby didn't pull away.

She wanted to see, to feel, what would happen. And she couldn't before, not surrounded by so many people, not so public, but now? Now it was just the two of them and a pillow Ruby was finding it harder to resist the urge to hurl away.

Sasha's fingers crawled up the sensitive skin of Ruby's side, the edges of her short nails lightly grazing and scratching, leaving goosebumps and little burning lines in their wake. Aching slowly, Sasha's hand slid up, up, up until it was cradling Ruby's breast.

Neither of them breathed as Sasha gently rubbed her thumb across Ruby's nipple, which instantly went tight and pebble-hard. A dull electric shock went through her from nipple to her clit, making her clench her thighs tight together, clench and relax, over and over, her hips moving involuntarily as Sasha's thumb kept stroking and stroking and stroking...

Sasha pulled away. Bereft, Ruby groaned in frustration.

“Sorry,” Sasha whispered. “Sorry, Rubes. I had to stop before I couldn’t stop. We need to talk. Tomorrow,” she added hastily as Ruby took in a deep breath in preparation.

“In the morning,” Ruby agreed after a moment. Then, wound up and confused and frustrated and full of desire, she turned over to face the wall and prayed for sleep to claim her quickly.

8

Sunlight streamed through the window of Ruby’s bedroom, but it didn’t wake Sasha up.

You couldn’t be woken up if you never went to sleep, after all.

Sasha sighed and turned to face Ruby and the bolster pillow that separated them. She was greeted with Ruby’s back, red hair down and tangled in a puddle across the pillow. Remembering that she’d sunk her hands into those soft, silky strands and pulled, remembering how that had made Ruby gasp and whisperfuck into the darkness... Sasha blushed. Slipping out of the bed, she grabbed her toiletry bag and some clothing and headed for the bathroom.

Sasha took her time with her morning routine, carefully taking the full dentist-recommended two minutes with her teeth. Her shower was a good hot one, leisurely yet attentive. She washed her face with care, then took the time to give herself a mini facial massage and a good moisturizing. Making sure every inch of herself was thoroughly dry, she pulled on a pair of soft black jeans and a gray henley before she meticulously styled her hair in the steamy reflection of the mirror.

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The whole time, she thought about what she could possibly say to Ruby. When she'd broken off their intense make-out session last night, saying that they needed to talk today had been the only thing she could think to get out of her mouth.

The weight of Ruby's full, warm breast in her palm, the sensation of stroking her pearl-hard nipple under her thumb... Sasha could still feel it now. If she hadn't stopped, she'd know how Ruby's pussy felt, how hot and wet it would be, how it would clench around her fingers. How much she craved it to press against her lips.

But she'd had to stop, for her own sanity. She just had no idea how to follow up her desperate declaration.

After forty-five minutes, Sasha knew she had taken all of the time she possibly could in the bathroom. More than was considerate, really, given that Ruby's parents and a cousin were also on this floor of the house and would need their own time in here sooner rather than later. Sasha gathered up her belongings and scuttled off to Ruby's bedroom.

Ruby was awake now, sitting up in the bed with her hair tousled and tumbling down around her shoulders. She'd pulled a blanket up to cover herself and was peering at Sasha nearsightedly from under her bangs, her expression faintly sheepish. "Good morning."

"Hiya." Sasha dropped her stuff on the desk chair in the corner and walked over to sit on the edge of the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Thirsty. I have a headache. My mouth tastes like I ate only cheese for three days

straight.” Ruby smacked her mouth and made a face. “Next time I’m invited to a champagne bar, I’m declining.”

“I think it was the double tequila shot more than the champagne,” Sasha said lightly. “But I don’t think that avoiding champagne bars is a bad idea in general.”

“Right.” Ruby flashed her an adorable smile, then fell silent. The room was very, very quiet apart from the sound of cars in the street and a murmur of conversation coming from downstairs.

Ruby took a deep breath. “Sash?—”

“Do you want some coffee?” Sasha interrupted, as the idea occurred to her. “I can go get you a cup, you can shower, then we can... yeah.”

Before Ruby could answer, Sasha bolted out the door and downstairs. She was in the kitchen in the blink of an eye, greeted by an astonished look from Mama Elena, who were heads together over their own cups of coffee.

Elena broke the silence. “I didn’t expect to see any of you kids awake before noon. You’re the second one, I just sent Dom Junior downstairs with breakfast for the kiddies.”

“Well, you know, early birds and all that.” Sasha made herself smile as she headed towards the coffeemaker. “I thought I’d get Ruby a cup of coffee while she got ready for the day.”

“So thoughtful.” Elena beamed and exchanged a significant glance with Cecelia. “It’s nice to see my Ruby treated so well, by such a good woman.”

“She deserves the best,” Sasha replied honestly.

Elena's smile broadened. "I agree. Listen, take her these." She got up and pulled a bakery box out of a cabinet. "They're her favorite, I got them special for her this morning. Aragostines." Opening the box, she revealed two lobster tail-shaped pastries made out of thin sheets of dough. "They're filled with pistachio butter. Oh, and I got you some too." She retrieved a second box. "Ruby told me you're allergic to tree nuts, so here's some lemon custard ones. Gino at the bakery assured me that they have separate counters for their nut-free stuff and they clean all the time, I hope that's all right."

"Oh, wow." Sasha blinked back emotional tears at Ruby remembering the allergy and making sure her mother was aware of it, at Elena sweetly finding an alternative and ensuring it was a safe one. She was reminded of her own mother, whom she hadn't seen in far too long. Sasha swallowed. "Thank you so much."

"Sweetheart, of course! Now, here, you're gonna have your hands full, let me get you these coffees in travel mugs." With expert speediness and the long experience of a mother of four, Elena pulled down two travel mugs and filled them with coffee, sugar, and milk. "I made yours like Ruby likes hers, I hope that's all right."

"It's fine," stammered Sasha, standing like a statue with her bakery boxes.

Elena moved around her, adjusting the boxes and tucking the handles of the travel mugs securely into Sasha's hands. "Now, you be careful going upstairs, and bring those mugs back down for a refill. You got it?"

"I got it." Maneuvering carefully, Sasha edged out of the kitchen and made her way up the stairs, focusing hard on her balance and on making sure she had each foot placed fully on the steps. At the top, she met Ruby coming out of the bathroom, to her relief. She hadn't been sure how she was going to open the bedroom door, laden with treats as she was.

“What’s all this?” Ruby shoved the door open and held it as Sasha inched over to the desk to set everything down.

“Breakfast treats from Mama Elena,” Sasha announced, selecting one mug of coffee and the box of pistachio pastries. She handed them over to Ruby, who dropped everything in her hands on the floor and smiled like sunshine when she saw the bakery logo on the box.

“Gino’s! That means this is...” A gasp as she lifted the lid. “Pistachio aragostines,” she cooed. “Come to mama.”

Spellbound, Sasha watched as Ruby raised the flaky pastry to her lips and bit in, letting out a tiny groan that sent Sasha flashing back to the previous night with a blush. “God, these are my favorite ever,” Ruby mumbled through her mouthful. “Heavenly. Mmm.”

Desperately needing something to take her mind off of the noises Ruby was making, Sasha opened up her own box of Aragostines. A bite into her lemon custard one immediately had her understanding Ruby’s pure orgasmic joy. The pastry was perfectly flaky and crispy, with a good buttery bite under all the edges. The custard was rich and full of the delicate sunshine flavor of sweet Meyer lemons.

“Isn’t it so good?” Ruby asked, her eyes wide and hopeful as she finished her treat off. “Gino’s is the best.”

Sasha had never been a pastry chef, but right at this moment she was tempted to enroll in a course just so she could make these forever. Even the pistachio ones—she’d risk it all to make Ruby as happy as these pastries did. And, selfishly, to have this kind of celestially delicious goodness at her beck and call whenever she wanted it. “Amazing,” she breathed, going in for another bite.

Ruby sat down on the edge of the bed with her coffee. “I’m going to save my second one. I need caffeine now.” She took a sip. “So. Last night, you said we needed to talk?”

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Sasha all but choked on the bite of pastry she'd just taken. Hurriedly, she reached for her coffee. "Say what now?" she asked, stalling for recovery time. She wasn't used to Ruby being so blunt! But then, until yesterday, she had never kissed or touched Ruby before, never left her high and dry. Is that what made the difference?

Ruby certainly seemed calmer and more composed than Sasha would have expected. She was continuing to sip at her coffee, hair damp and fragrant around her shoulders, eyes inquisitive, demeanor fully unbothered. "You said we needed to talk. You had my breast in your hand, you were kissing me, pulling my hair. I told you, that doesn't come easy to me..." Her bravado melted away. "What did I do wrong?"

Of all the things Sasha thought Ruby would ask, that, in such a soft and wounded tone, wasn't what she expected. Sasha put down her pastry and rushed over to sit next to Ruby, taking her free hand. "Nothing. You did nothing wrong." But she was starting to panic, because she still didn't know what to say. She could not, no way, tell Ruby she'd pumped the brakes because sleeping with Ruby, touching her, kissing her, making her come, would be the beginning of the end for Sasha.

She was already in love with Ruby. Getting physically involved was the last frontier, and if they did that now while they were in this weird fake relationship, it would kill Sasha to see it end once they were home. She couldn't do it. But she also couldn't tell Ruby the truth about why.

Sasha realized, however, that she could fudge things a little, and it would only be a little. "You did nothing wrong," she repeated, scooting closer and pressing a kiss into Ruby's hair. "But we were drunk. I wouldn't want it to be like that, with you. With anyone. It's just not right."

“Oh.” Ruby swallowed hard. “Okay. I just felt...”

“I know. I’m sorry. I never meant to make you feel bad, or to leave you hanging, Rubes. But things weren’t supposed to get that far anyway, right?” Sasha tried to inject jovial cheer into her voice, to get that sad rejected look off of Ruby’s face. “We’re only girlfriends in public.”

“That’s true.” Ruby’s face was unreadable for a moment, but then she sat up straight and smiled. Carefully wiping her lips clean with a tissue from a box on her end table, she leaned over and kissed Sasha, just a soft, fleeting butterfly of a kiss on the lips. “Apology accepted, and I’m sorry for putting you in that position. Friends?”

“Friends,” Sasha agreed, firmly ignoring the dagger that word was to her poor tender heart.

The Fierelli house was bursting at the seams with dozens of family members ready to caravan over to Lorenzo’s Bar and Restaurant for Angela and Daniel’s rehearsal dinner. Ruby reveled in the hustle and bustle and loud conversation of it all as she and Sasha arrived downstairs. As much as she loved her life in LA with her chosen family, coming home to Winston and Natalie was never like this, never a loud and wonderful cacophony of love and bickering and happiness.

“Hey! Everybody listen,” Papa Dom bellowed, his powerful baritone bringing the multiple conversations to a screeching halt. “I got all the cars sorted out, come see me and I’ll tell you who you’re ridin’ with. Rubes, Sasha, you’re with me and Mama, plus Rosie and Jim, so you all go get in the Suburban. Everybody else, see me right now so we can get this show on the road!”

Grabbing Sasha’s hand, Ruby scooted out the door right behind her sister and brother-in-law. She and Rose were very familiar with Papa Dom’s strict rules when he was acting as Caravan Chief. When assignments were given, it was best to simply

get out of the way. The four of them piled themselves into the Suburban and buckled in.

“What’s this Chiara’s place like?” Sasha asked, snugging her seatbelt up over her lap. “Italian?”

“Upscale Italian, and it’s in a mansion,” Jim said, his amiable face brightening up. “Beautiful place with incredible food. We had our rehearsal dinner there too, didn’t we, Rosie?”

“We did,” Rose confirmed. “So did Dom Junior and Dante.” A lovely, if sly, smile spread across her face, and Ruby narrowed her eyes at her big sister. Rose’s smile only grew bigger and she continued, “It’s become a sort of tradition. Maybe you’ll continue it, Ruby?”

“Maybe one day,” Ruby gritted out from behind her clenched teeth.

“You’ll have to tell us what you think of the food, Sasha,” Rose trilled out as Jim chuckled into his fist. Sasha went pink.

“Thankyou, Rose,” Ruby bit out, resisting the urge to reach out and yank on her sister’s high ponytail. The best strategy for coping with any of her siblings when they felt mischievous was to grin and bear it. Violence would only beget further violence, and she had no interest in finding out just how lethal Rose’s knucklepunch still was. Her sister had a real knack for finding the softest, most easily bruisable site on a person with the first blow. Ruby rubbed at a phantom ache that sprang up from her upper thigh, circa approximately 2002.

Papa Dom and Elena climbed into the Suburban. “Everybody got their belts on?” Dom asked, cranking the vehicle on. At the collective nod and the click of Elena’s seatbelt buckle, he let out a whoop and pulled out of the driveway. “Then let’s go

eat!”

Ruby leaned over to whisper in Sasha’s ear. “I’m sorry about Rose.”

“It’s okay,” Sasha whispered back. “It’s cute that she wants to help plan your future wedding.”

“She’s not the only one,” Ruby sighed, looking down at her hands in her lap. She began to pick at her cuticles. “They all keep making comments to me. It’s... a lot.” And she’d never let them know how it hurt her, how she wished shedidhave someone to plan a wedding with.

A gentle hand wrapped around hers and squeezed. Ruby looked up to see Sasha smiling fondly at her, as if she understood what Ruby wasn’t saying. Ruby swallowed. She probablydidunderstand. Just like Ruby understood that Sasha was likelywishing she had a crowd of rowdy, interfering siblings of her own. She squeezed Sasha’s hand back. At least she had her, no matter how puzzling her own feelings were at the moment.

They let everyone else carry the conversation for the twenty-minute drive to Chiara’s, each of them occasionally interjecting some kind of agreeable noise when called for. It was nice, Ruby thought, to be here with such a good friend, one who knew her so well, who could sync in and just know how to move with her through a crazy week like this one.

Dom pulled up in front of the lovely old mansion that housed the restaurant. “Rubes, you two go in there and let them know we’re all arriving, okay? Make sure they’re ready for us.”

“But we’re all the way in the back seat, Pops,” Ruby replied, bewildered. “Why can’t Jim and Rosie do it?”

“Be a good girl, Ruby Margarita,” Elena said, twisting in her seat to fix Ruby with a stern glare she knew all too well. “Do as Papa says.”

Ruby exchanged glances with Sasha, who shrugged and reached for the door handle. “We can manage it, no problem,” Sasha said. “Rose’ll scoot over and let us out.”

“Yep,” Rose concurred, lifting the arm of her seat and sliding over to snuggle up to her husband. “There you go.”

Sasha eased herself out of the SUV and turned, extending her hand to Ruby to help her down. “Thank you,” Ruby said, blushing with pleasure.

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“Run on in, girls,” Elena instructed.

Ruby gripped Sasha’s hand and headed into the restaurant, making a beeline for the elegant, dark-haired woman at the host stand. “Hi there. The Fierelli party is here, we’re just waiting for the rest of us to arrive.”

The hostess looked down at her list, adjusting her gold wire-rimmed glasses to get a better look. “Fierelli, party of two. Yes, we have your table all ready, just follow me.” She picked up a pair of black leather-bound menu folders and waited, looking at them expectantly.

“Two? No, no, that’s not right. It’s more like two dozen... it’s a rehearsal dinner.” Panic began to set in, making her heart flutter. “There should be a whole reservation.” Of course, this would happen when they sent her in to handle everything! Ruby swallowed and tried not to cry.

The hostess smiled reassuringly. “I assure you, it’s a party of two here. Domenic Fierelli called in the reservation three days ago. You’re lucky a table came available!”

Sasha squeezed and patted her hand. “I’ll go check with your dad, Rubes. Don’t worry. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.” Blinking, Ruby sat down on a little black lacquered bench. The hostess shrugged and put her menus back in the bracket on her stand, circling back around to wait for another, less eccentric party to check in for their table.

How could this go so terribly wrong? Ruby knew her family, they would have double

and triple checked this. This check-in should have been a cakewalk, a bit of nothing. She lifted her hand to her mouth and began to gently nibble at her thumbnail.

“Quit that.” Sasha swept in and pulled her hand back away. “Listen, your dad’s gone. Nobody from the family’s here.”

“What? Oh, my God.” Ruby felt dizzy. Just then, her phone vibrated in her pocket. She pulled it out.

Enjoy your romantic dinner, baby girl. We love you two!

“Oh,” she whispered, knowing her eyes were round as gumballs at the sight of her father’s message.

Sasha held her hand out. “Can I see?” Ruby handed it over, and Sasha read the screen. Then blinked and read it again. Her face went tomato red from neck to forehead. “Oh.Oh.”

“We’ve been had, Sash.” Heat was spreading across her own face at the realization. Her own parents had conspired to send her on a romantic date with Sasha. A romantic and very expensive date, she knew well. After all, as Jim had pointed out, they’d all been here several times for family occasions. The menu had often changed over the years, but the prices had always stayed... well, at a level Ruby could never afford even if she’d been a bestselling author ten times over.

Swallowing hard, she stood up and brushed her sweaty hands down her good black knee-length skirt. The hostess looked at her with interest as she approached, Sasha tagging close behind. “You said there was a table for two, for me?” Ruby asked, stomach in knots.

“Yes, indeed.” The hostess flashed them a quick smile and pulled out the menus

again. “Follow me. I’ve got a great table for you, overlooking the water.”

“Oh, wow,” Sasha muttered in amazement, following behind. “Can we afford this place, Rubes?”

“Everything is taken care of, ladies,” the hostess informed them, leading them up to the second floor of the converted mansion. “You’re to order anything you want. Your waiter is going to bring you a complimentary bottle of wine.”

“Complimentary?” Ruby asked, knowing that the wine list was as exclusive and upscale as the menu.

“To you.” The hostess winked and led them to a table that did indeed overlook the water. “Jason will be your waiter this evening, and he’ll be with you in just a moment.”

As she vanished, Sasha pulled out a chair and held it. “Ruby?”

“Thank you.” She sat down and fiddled with the silver moon pendant around her neck as Sasha took her own seat. “This is crazy, Sash.”

“It is. Do I dare even look at the prices?” She opened her menu. “Never mind. They gave me the menu without them.”

Ruby checked hers. “Me too. Jesus. Pops can’t really have meant for us to get what we want?”

Sasha shrugged. “He hasn’t struck me as the kind of guy who’d lie about that.”

True enough. Dom was a straight shooter, as direct as they came. And Ruby was the baby of the family who’d brought a ‘significant other’ home at last. So yes, this was

exactly what he'd intended.

She looked at Sasha. "I think we should start with the baked clams," she announced. "I know I usually don't eat seafood besides shrimp, but they're so good, it's my favorite appetizer here—only here. And they have a crabmeat salad I think you'll love, because you and Dante like a lot of the same foods and head over that."

"And for dinner?" Sasha asked, an indulgent grin on her face as she leaned on the table, propping her chin in her hand.

"Let's see... they have this fish they debone and grill right at the table. I've never had it but I think you'd really like that." She scanned the menu. "I'll have the Caesar salad and then their roast duck, it's incredible. And then dessert..."

"We don't have a dessert menu here yet," Sasha pointed out.

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“We don’t need it. You’re going to get the deep-fried banana cheesecake and you are going to love it.”

“I bet I am,” Sasha replied with a grin.

The food at Chiara’s was indeed as incredible as it sounded. Sasha groaned as she pushed aside her plate with the remains of her grilled sea bass. “I can’t possibly eat dessert,” she announced, wishing she could open the top button of her best black trousers. They didn’t have any kind of forgiving elastic in the waistband, and she was only just shy of being uncomfortably full.

Ruby’s recommendations had been thoughtful and exactly what Sasha might have ordered for herself if she’d been alone. The baked clams just by themselves had been revelatory—they’d have to have been, to get Ruby to eat any seafood apart from shrimp and love it—the crabmeat salad generously portioned and perfectly put together. The tableside-grilled sea bass was delicate yet bursting with succulence and flavor, and it wasn’t the least bit overdone. So, Sasha knew the dessert Ruby had suggested would be amazing as well.

She was just so full.

Ruby was also eyeballing the last of her duck and its accompaniments—which Sasha had also tasted and swooned over—and seemed to feel dubious about dessert as well. But she looked up at Sasha with an adorably woeful look on her face. “I want the cheesecake,” she whispered. “But my stomach...”

She clearly had intense feelings about this banana cheesecake, which only made

Sasha want to try it more herself, not to mention to get the rush that came from doing something nice for Ruby and seeing her smile. Sasha took a careful deep breath. “Why don’t you get a go box for that, and then we can split the banana cheesecake?”

The grateful look she got in return made her feel like she’d just saved a puppy from oncoming traffic. “Yes, please, let’s split it,” Ruby burbled in glee, raising her hand ever so slightly to get their waiter’s attention. Sasha basked in the glow of that happiness that she loved so dearly.

The dinner had been incredibly romantic: candlelit, excellent wine—a beautiful Italian red with a full body, followed by glasses of a delicately fruity white to go with their entrées—and the most incredible food Sasha had ever tasted. Their conversation had flowed and centered on themselves in a way it never had before; usually they talked about their friends, their work, the Lounge, the movies or concerts they’d all go see as a group.

Sasha realized somewhere between bites of sea bass and potato terrine that this was possibly the first time she and Ruby had ever truly been alone since they met years ago. She did consider Ruby her best friend, and they did things together, but never alone together. Someone from their friend group was always there. And this week, they’d been surrounded by family until they escaped to go sleep.

While Sasha had known a lot of factual, observable information about Ruby, after that night she knew just how passionately Ruby felt about her work, whether published under her own name or someone else’s. How characters lived in her head, acting out their stories, revealing themselves bit by bit. How she kept a notebook by her bed to write down middle of the night ideas, and some mornings she woke up to find she’d written either a whole story outline or three pages of scribbled nonsense.

After two glasses of the red, Sasha had found herself talking about how, at the age of three years old, her mother had carefully taught her how to wash and peel potatoes

and carrots for stew. At five, she was learning how to tell a weed from an herb or vegetable in the garden. When she was ten, her father began teaching her how to grill in the lazy, humid warmth of the Minnesota summers. Everything she loved about food was rooted in how much her parents loved her, and it had become how Sasha herself showed how much she loved the people in her life.

That, she realized, was skating a little too close to the edge of danger, and she redirected the conversation back to the dinner itself. And to what the rest of the Fierellis were doing.

“I wonder where they really went for the rehearsal dinner,” Ruby had wondered. “And how they all kept this secret. Because I know they all had to be in on it. At least my siblings and their spouses, anyway. But they’re all such gossipy bitches! I can’t believe nobody let this leak.” She’d reached across the table to give Sasha’s hand a gentle squeeze, and her little smile was lovely. “What a nice surprise this was. It’s lovely being here in this place I’ve come my whole life, with you.”

Sasha had swallowed hard, and Sasha had smiled, and Sasha had poured herself the last of the bottle of red.

Now, a wide white plate with two forks and a mountainous wedge of something battered, fried, and delicious looking drizzled in caramel was being placed in the center of their cleared table. “That... looks pornographically good,” Sasha stammered.

“It is.” Ruby handed her a fork and gestured with her own, a tiny smirk lifting the corner of her mouth. “You first. I want to see your face when you try it.”

There was something in the way she said it, something a little seductive and naughty that Sasha was sure Ruby had no idea was there. But it was, and it made Sasha blush. Focusing on the cheesecake, she broke through the tender pastry crust with her fork,

making the thick caramel run down over the creamy ivory filling. Mesmerized, she lifted a bite away and slowly slipped it into her mouth as Ruby watched.

The groan fell from her lips before she could even think to stop it. “Jesus Christ.”

For the second time in a week, she wanted to propose to a baked good. The bakers and dessert chefs of Staten Island were truly masters of their craft, because she had never, ever had it so good in terms of sweet treats. The cream cheese and banana filling was warm, fluffy, and melted on her tongue. The caramel had been made with delicately browned butter, giving it a deliciously nutty depth of flavor. She couldn’t even talk about the perfectly flaky, buttery batter.

Across the table, Ruby’s eyes were half-closed, and the moan that came out of her mouth was just like the one this morning that had made Sasha remember the bachelor party and...everything else. “I could eat this forever.”

“Get me the recipe and I would make it for you forever,” Sasha breathed. She hadn’t said it this morning over the aragostines, but she couldn’t help but let it slip now.

Ruby’s eyes opened and their gazes locked. Curiosity was beginning to stir in those blue depths. Curiosity and... possibly the slightest hint of realization? Was she connecting the dots? The delectable bite of dessert began to dry in the back of Sasha’s mouth.

“Ruby? Ruby Fierelli!”

A dark-haired man about their age was standing by the table, a broad grin on his handsome face and good humor in his brown eyes. Ruby squealed a little as she leaped to her feet to give him a huge hug. “Mike! I didn’t think I’d get to see you before the wedding!”

“Same! Isn’t this the night of the rehearsal dinner?” Mike stood back and looked at Ruby quizzically. “Why are you here?”

Ruby looked back at the table, where Sasha was sitting awkwardly with her mouth full of cheesecake that suddenly tasted like sawdust and fear. She tried to smile as Ruby indicated her. “My family thought my partner and I could use a romantic dinner out together. They tricked us and dropped us off here. So, they’re... I don’t know where, but we’re here.” Ruby offered Sasha a soft smile before she turned back to Mike. “This is Sasha Ashford. She’s the chef at the Indigo Lounge, I’ve told you about the Lounge.”

“Oh, wow, this is the genius chef I’ve heard so much about?” Mike edged past Ruby to get to Sasha, who found herself forced to swallow the cheesecake and stand up to shake his hand. “The way Ruby talks about your food in emails, I know my husband and I have got to come out to visit someday. I’m Mike Colangelo.”

The name rang a loud bell. “The prom date? When you broke your wrist?”

He threw his head back and laughed heartily. “I can’t believe you got that story out of her! She always forbade all of us to talk about it, she was so embarrassed. You really are someone special if you know about that.”

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“Oh, I don’t know...” This was a lot. It was one thing to be fake girlfriends with Ruby’s family, but with someone who was clearly as much found family to her as anyone at the Lounge was, it felt different. Especially since Ruby talked to him about her to him, told him about Sasha’s cooking so well that he wanted to come try it. It made things feel a lot less fake somehow. She had no idea how to cope with that.

“This is my husband, Gray.” Mike was motioning to a slender blond man that walked up behind him. Gray tucked his arm through Mike’s in a gesture that was unconscious, yet so tender it made Sasha’s heart ache. There was a clear comfortable familiarity between them that she envied, but she also tried to soak it in while they talked to Ruby about Daniel’s wedding.

She wanted that, so badly it hurt. Every day she spent with Ruby in this fake relationship that was feeling more real by the minute, she had no idea how she would ever be able to walk away. She wanted the casual hand holding to be permanent, she wanted to be able to walk up to Ruby and wrap an arm around her waist and for Ruby to lean into the embrace the way Gray was leaning against Mike.

Friends, she’d said just that morning, and she’d meant it. This morning, she had been sure she could survive whatever happened this week. They’d be able to go back to life as it was before and eventually, it would hurt Sasha less.

Now, after an exquisite candlelit dinner and all of the revelations of the last few moments, revelations that Ruby remained blissfully oblivious to as she chatted with her friend and his husband... now, the dagger in Sasha’s heart, the dagger she’d basically thrust into her own chest when she agreed to this...

...Now, it began to twist.

9

“Where’s Dom?” Danny was craning his neck around to look for his older brother-slash-groomsman, making it very difficult for Ruby to successfully tie his necktie.

She whacked him upside the head. “Hold still,” she instructed over his yelp of protest. Untangling the sloppy knot in the silk, she began again. “Dom is getting the water and protein bar you asked for. I told you to eat your damn breakfast this morning.”

“I was too nervous,” Danny muttered, rubbing the back of his head. But otherwise, he stood obediently still as Ruby finally got the intricate Eldridge knot he’d insisted on tied at his throat. She’d watched countless YouTube tutorials and practiced on anyone that would stand still long enough back in LA, so she was determined that it would be absolutely perfect. With a gimlet eye, she inspected the knot. Flawless, she thought with satisfaction, and stepped back to fetch his white and scarlet rose boutonniere.

Danny looked in the mirror. “Hey, that looks great, Rubes. Thanks for learning the technique.”

“You’re welcome. It was fun, really. Hold still again.” Carefully, she held the little bunch of flowers against his lapel and began to work the long pin through the layers of fabric and flower stems. The fragrance aroma of fresh, beautiful roses and greenery filled her nose. It reminded her of the glimpse she’d caught of the sanctuary as she passed through that morning, dress bag in one hand and her hair wound so tight on sponge rollers she still had a headache three hours later. “Have you seen the sanctuary yet? It’s beautiful.”

Confusion flashed across Danny’s face. “No, isn’t that bad luck?”

“It’s bad luck to see the bride, not the place you’re getting married! Come on.” The boutonniere was securely in place, and she gave it a pat before grabbing her little brother by the wrist. “Follow me.”

With her free hand, she scooped up a handful of her maroon satin skirt and scampered out of the groom’s room at St Clare’s Catholic Church, Danny in tow. St. Clare’s was a maze, but there had not been any major renovations to the historic building since she’d last attended Mass as a teenager, so she easily led him through back hallways and staircases to the church foyer, where the ornate wooden doors to the sanctuary stood open.

It was gratifying to see Danny’s jaw drop at the sight of Angela’s rose-festooned paradise. The heady aroma of the flowers filled the air and wreathed around their heads, and Ruby could see the blissful looks on the faces of the handful of attendees who had arrived early. Stands with huge vases full of scarlet and white roses, an exquisitely crafted archway for the wedding party to pass under at the entrance, and somehow, even globes of roses studded with twinkling fairy lights were descending from the sanctuary’s pendant lamps. Ruby didn’t want to think about how Angela’s floral artist cousin had managed to safely hang those. Or how he’d gotten permission.

“All she ever said she wanted in a wedding was a room full of roses,” Danny breathed, a gentle happiness glowing in his eyes. “Look at my girl making her dreams come true.”

Seeing the pure love he had for Angela, for her dreams, it made Ruby melt. “God, I hope I have what you two have one day,” she breathed, the yearning for it making her heart clench in her chest. “The way you love her... we should all be so lucky.”

Happiness gave way to astonishment in Danny’s eyes as he turned to look at her. “But you do have it, Rubes. The way Sasha looks at you when you’re not looking... how she loves making you happy. That kiss at the party! Of course you have that.”

He gazed at her searchingly. “Don’t you know you have it?”

“I...” Confusion whirled through her brain as puzzle pieces of information began to slot into place. “I guess I...”

“I guess you didn’t know! That’s crazy, you bring her out here to meet the fam and you don’t even know what you have.” Danny threw his head back and guffawed. “Don’t you write all those books about love? I’d figured you’d be the first person to know when you met the love of your life.”

Love of my life! Sash? “It’s different when it’s in person,” she hedged, still trying to make sense of what he’d seen that she hadn’t put together. The things she had seen that she’d filed away or forced herself not to examine too closely.

“It must be, because otherwise I have no idea how you missed it.” He shook his head and clapped her on the shoulder. “Well, get yourself together, Rubes. Don’t take Sasha for granted. She’s a keeper, and you know Ma and Pa love her already. You can’t let that go.”

“Oh, you’re just hopped up on lovey dovey wedding vibes. What do you know?” she asked with a shaky laugh. Could she possibly have stumbled her way into what she’d been looking for her whole life?

“More than you do, apparently.” Danny rolled his eyes. “You know how happy I was when you said you and Sasha had gotten together and you were bringing her home? Like, I always thought you two should be together, I was thrilled. I’ve liked her since our first trip out to LA, I was amazed you were taking so long to pair up.”

That was definitely news to her. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I was about to if you brought anyone else.” He grinned. “Thanks for taking that off

my plate. But come on, we gotta go back to the groom's room and see if Dom found me that protein bar."

"Yeah," she said absently, trudging along behind him, fingers clenched so tightly around the wad of satin skirt in her hand that she knew it was going to be visibly crumpled and her mother was going to kill her when she saw it. But that was just going to have to take a back seat while Ruby grappled with the fact that Sasha might actually have feelings for her, her little brother thought they belonged together, and she... didn't hate the idea. Not even a little bit.

"Mama Elena, can I get you something? A glass of pineapple juice, a sandwich, something?" Sasha tugged at the collar of her black button-down. She hoped she wasn't accidentally loosening the knot of her maroon tie as she did so. She'd been unusually clumsy tying it that morning and wasn't in the mood to fuss with it again.

Elena Fierelli was lounging on a divan in the family room of St. Clare's, looking cool and collected. Sasha had been assigned to keep her unbothered and calm, but she was starting to feel as though she was entirely surplus to requirements. The woman was fully dressed apart from her pale pink satin pumps, which were neatly lined up next to the little lounging couch.

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“I’m fine, sweetheart.” Elena stretched and wiggled her toes. “Just enjoying the last few minutes of freedom my tootsies are gonna have for a while. Don’t you worry about me. I’m just fine.”

Meanwhile, Sasha was somehow as jittery as though this were her own wedding. Fat chance. “You’re not... I don’t know. Nervous? Excited?”

“Honey, Danny is my baby boy and I love him, but he’s the fourth of my kids to get married.” Elena smiled, and Sasha saw so much of Ruby in the glowing good humor of it. “Of course I’m excited! But it’s gonna be a long day, I’m not burning up my energy too early.” She pointed to the shoes. “I need all my reserves to deal with wearing those and still get in a few dances at the reception while my temper’s sweet.”

Sasha eyed the shoes. Unlike Ruby’s shoes with their barely an inch block heel, Elena’s shoes sported a slender, three-inch stiletto. “Why on Earth did you choose that heel?”

Looking almost affronted, Elena sat up straighter and yanked up the knee-length skirt of her pink dress, lifting one stockinged leg into the air and pointing her toes. “Because I may be in my sixties, but I’ve still got great legs! I’ll be wearing heels until I break a hip.”

It was an effort not to choke herself laughing. Elena really was so much like her younger daughter, down to the twinkle in her eyes. “Got it. Fair point.”

Swinging her feet down to the floor, Elena stood up and walked over to Sasha. She reached up to cup Sasha’s face in her hands and pulled her down for a forehead kiss

and a smile. “You have been a gem this week, my darling. I really can’t thank you enough for helping out as much as you have. I know Rose and Cecelia appreciate you lending a hand in the kitchen.” Her face was soft with fondness. “I’m so glad my Ruby has found a wonderful woman like yourself to bring home.”

Guilt pierced Sasha’s heart. The Fierellis were such an amazing family, and had been so kind to her, and she and Ruby had been lying to them this whole week. It was going to be as painful to leave them behind as it would be to give up on her dream of being able to love Ruby for real. She had come to adore them, to feel accepted into their fold.

What would Ruby tell them? How would their “breakup” go? As good a writer as Ruby was, Sasha was sure it would be heartwrenching. And as close as they were—even closer now after this week, the last few months—she trusted that it would be something that was kind to her.

Still, it was a depressing thought, a dream popping like a balloon in a plane engine. She sighed, and Elena cocked her head to look at her with concern. “What’s the matter, Sasha? On a day like this, you look so sad.”

“Just... I don’t want this to end,” Sasha said truthfully. “You’ve all been wonderful. I can’t believe it’s almost over and we leave the day after tomorrow.”

“Why borrow tomorrow’s troubles today? You set that aside.” Elena gave Sasha’s cheek a brisk little pat. “Right now is for happy thoughts, we’re celebrating!”

“You’re right,” Sasha agreed. It would be a long day if she moped about their departure. And anyway, she did love weddings. She shook off her sadness and stood up straight. “Of course you’re right.”

“There we go, that’s my girl.” Stepping back, Elena clapped her hands and sat down

to pull her shoes on. “Besides, you might leave in two days, but who knows? Maybe in a year or two you’ll come back and we’ll do all of this again with you and Ruby, hm?”

“Hmm,” Sasha squeaked out, and fled the room.

“By the power vested in me by the Lord God Our Father and the State of New York, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride.” Father De Palma was beaming as he watched Danny swoop Angela into his arms and dip her back for a passionate kiss. As they stood back up flushed and delighted, he spread his arms wide. “Mr. and Mrs. Daniel James Fierelli, everybody!”

The string quartet in the back corner of the sanctuary struck up Mendelssohn’s iconic wedding march and everyone stood up to cheer as Daniel and Angela walked and waved their way down the aisle. Ruby followed along behind, grateful for waterproof mascara and the best setting spray she could find at the drugstore. Tears had started running down her cheeks at the I Do’s and she didn’t anticipate them stopping until the Fierellis and Pausinis were partying their asses off at the reception.

As she passed Sasha, she reached out her hand for a quick squeeze. They both laughed helplessly at each other when they realized they were both crying like babies. Shaking her head, Ruby sailed on down the aisle and out the church doors to get to the limo that was taking the wedding party to the Grand Colony Ballroom. She cast a weather eye towards the sky, happy to see it was clear as a bell and blue as a baby’s eyes. Between that and her nearly flat shoes, there would be no repeats of her and Michael’s disastrous senior prom night.

Michael. She’d seen him on the groom’s side with his husband Gray. They’d been holding hands and looking weepy, and at one point Gray laid his head on Michael’s shoulder in a gesture so intimate and sweet that Ruby wanted to bitesomething to relieve the furious envy that sprang up in her gut. God, she wanted that.

Don't you know you have it? Danny's voice echoed in her head, and she nearly did trip down the steps of St. Clare's. Dante, behind her, grabbed her upper arms and kept her upright. "Whoa, baby sis. You good?"

"Yep, yep, no problem." Her heart was racing. "Get me into the limo and a glass of champagne in my hand."

It had not escaped her notice that for someone who rarely drank, she was really getting through the bubbles this week. Fortunately, her family hadn't seemed to notice. Dante kept a firm hand on her elbow and escorted her to their limo, where she was duly installed into a seat and presented with a glass of Cristal.

And then another one.

By the time they were all loaded in and had gotten to the Grand Colony, she was three glasses deep on an empty stomach.

Oops.

Sasha had ridden with the parents and partners to the reception hall and was waiting outside when the wedding party limo pulled up. Her face was astonished as Ruby toddled her way out and towards her. "Have you already been drinking?" she whispered with concern, and Ruby giggled even as she melted internally at someone being worried for her.

"Yes, and I need snacks now, please," she whispered back, tucking her arm through Sasha's with a little thrill.

"Got it. You don't have to be in the receiving line, right?"

"No, I am free to sit down and eat crud... croo... croupiers."

“Crudités,” Sasha replied, and was she stifling laughter? “I think I’ll get you something a little more substantial... and a glass of apple juice.”

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Obediently, Ruby allowed herself to be led up the steps of the Grand Colony and deposited into a soft armchair out of the sight of incoming guests. Vaguely, she recognized the room she was in as the one she'd been carried into the night of her broken ankle and chortled to herself.

"What's so funny?" Sasha appeared with a small plate piled high with snacks and a flute of apple juice.

"Nothing really. Prom memories, you know." She accepted the offerings with gratitude. "You're so good to me, Sash."

She watched with interest as Sasha's cheeks went rosy. "Well, you know, you're my friend, I just like to help."

"Thank you." The first bite of prosciutto-wrapped melon was heaven. Ruby hoovered her way through the nibbles, sitting back with a sigh of relief when they were all gone. "Better. Much better. Sash, I just love you."

She'd often told her friends she loved them, Sasha included. But for all that she thought of herself as some Great Observer type, she'd never watched any of them for a reaction before. Even if she had, however, she was pretty sure she would have noticed had any of the others had ever reacted the way Sasha did now.

Which was to flush tomato red, stammer out, "I'm thirsty," and then flee into the reception hall, ignoring the startled glances she got from the receiving line.

Very interesting indeed.

“Hi again, more apple juice?” the friendly bartender asked, setting down the glass she was polishing.

“No, your best whiskey, and make it a double.” Sasha crossed her arms on the bar and dropped her head down into them with a groan.

Shortly, a glass scraped across the marble bartop by her head. “It’s an open bar, I made it a triple,” came the bartender’s voice. “You look like you needed it. Relationship trouble?”

“In a sense.” She straightened up and gulped down a third of the glass. “Just being in love with my best friend things.”

“Ah.” With a deft hand, the bartender topped up the glass of Lagavulin. “Been there. Drink up, then, I’m happy to keep you lubricated.” With a wink, she moved on to the wedding guests that were beginning to line up for their own beverages. Sasha shoved a ten-dollar bill into the tip jar, took her drink and crept away, needing a moment to herself.

Sash, I just love you. Her heart skipped two beats remembering Ruby’s sweet, slightly champagne-blurred voice. All of the Lounge family told each other they loved one another all the time, of course. But after this week, when it was just the two of them, when Sasha’s emotions were bubbling just beneath her skin—no, it felt different, or she was taking it differently. Either way, it was too much for right now. She downed another third of the smooth whiskey, barely noticing that it was really nice.

Ruby looked so beautiful today. And the wedding had been lovely, a fairytale that brought everyone to tears. Daniel and Angela loved each other so damn much... Sasha shot back the last third of her whiskey, uncaring that it really should be sipped. It burned down her throat and into her stomach.

She wanted so much what they had. And damn it, maybe Ruby hadn't meant that I love you in a romantic way, she knew better than to even think that for a second, but they had such a connection already, if she just got off her ass and said something, could that connection be more? What might happen if she could just be brave for once?

Maybe she'd find out tonight.

After a few more shots of liquid courage. Sasha headed back out for the bar. If she put a twenty in the tip jar, maybe she could get a couple of shots of top shelf vodka.

10

The speeches were deadly dull. Ruby had already delivered hers—it brought the house to tears, as she had expected, and she was proud of it—but now Kate was waxing poetically and at extreme length about Angela and their sisterhood and... frankly, it was lacking. She liked Kate, but she also wished Kate had asked her to lend a hand with editing. With a subtle lift of her hand, Ruby caught a waiter's attention to refill her wine glass.

Across the room, she saw Sasha sitting with Rose, Jim, and Aunt Cecelia. Ruby wished they were sitting together. She was situated between Danny and Dom Junior at the main table, and as much as she loved her brothers, Danny was entirely besotted with his bride while Dom was more interested in talking fantasy football with Dante on his right. Bo-ring. She drained half her wine glass.

She could be thinking about where she'd be going next with Declan and Nicola's story, which she hadn't touched since she'd arrived in New York. Or she could be texting Nat for updates on Winston. But she missed her sweet little old man and was tipsy enough that pictures of him would make her cry. And if she was going to think about any romance right now, it was whatever romance she might be able to have

with Sasha.

Ruby picked up her wine glass and sipped, keeping her eyes on her friend. Her shy, sweet friend who had always been there for her, who made sure she ate and drank when she needed it, who supported Ruby's writing wholeheartedly, who Ruby's mother absolutely adored...

...who gave her kisses that thrilled her deep in her soul, who pulled her hair just right, who somehow knew exactly how to touch her to make her toes curl... what if everything Ruby had ever looked for had been right in front of her the whole time? Every little thing that Sasha had done to help and support her, what if each one of those had been Sasha saying, I love you?

Danny nudged her with his elbow. "Stare any harder and you're gonna drill holes through her skull, Rubes."

She shook her head and blinked. "Oh."

He squinted and looked at her as if he was searching her face for answers. "Hey, that conversation we had really did shake you up, huh, Rubes?"

She could only laugh and swallow down more wine, shaking her head. Her baby brother sure was a clown with that understatement.

And he wouldn't let up, either. "Rubes, come on, you had to know, didn't you? On some level you had to know or you wouldn't be with her, right?"

Ruby motioned for another refill and waited until her glass was full and she had her face all but buried in it before mumbling, "I'm not with her."

“Huh?”

“I’m not with her,” she whispered, leaning to get right in his ear. With her free hand, she grabbed his wrist and squeezed until he let out a tiny yelp of pain. “We’re not really together. It’s fake, she’s helping me out. I couldn’t come to the wedding without a date! I’d never hear the end of it.”

“Oh, what the fu—Rubes! You gotta be kidding!” Danny glanced around to make sure no one was paying attention to them. “And here I thought you’d finally woken up! I was so happy for you. We all were! What the hell?”

“I mean, I don’t, I just...” She set her glass down and took a deep breath. “Look, I’m not going to have this huge long conversation in whispers, because it is a huge long conversation. Let me cut out the filler: we’re not really together. But now I am thinking maybe I could explore the notion.”

“Explore the—Ruby, do not make me strangle you on my wedding day,” Daniel hissed.

“Well, offer me some constructive advice, then!” She was a little too loud, catching Angela’s attention.

The bride leaned in. “What’s going on?”

Danny kissed her. “Baby, my sister is real goddamn dumb, but I’ll have to explain when we’re alone later, trust me.” He turned back to Ruby, rummaging in his pockets. “I was going to suggest you grab Sasha and use my car to go back to the

house and talk, but you have been putting away the vino, sis. What I'm doing instead is getting you an Uber. This party's gonna go all night, the house is empty, get your girl and gotalk,for Christ's sake." He began swiping and poking at his phone. "There. You have got ten minutes, your driver is Lillian and she's in a blue Nissan. You remember how to sneak out of here?"

"Yes, little brother, I do." Ruby rolled her eyes. "But hey, I wanted to dance! It's your wedding, don't send me away."

"You have to go away so I can dance atyourwedding, Ruby. Now go!"

"She seems to be trying to send signals," Rose observed, watching as Ruby, at the head table, was twitching her head to the right.

Sasha was a good half bottle into the bar's Ketel One stash, and it was hard to focus. "You think?"

Rose was propping her chin in her hand and squinting at her little sister. "Yeah. Definitely signals. I think there's a..." She sat up. "Yeah, there's a door over on that far wall. Does she want you to sneak out? Ridiculous. That's the worst way to get out of here."

"Sneak out?" Sasha's brain felt like pudding.

"I got you. Don't worry." Rose's hands moved in what looked like a complicated array of gestures, then she grabbed Sasha and stood up. "Follow me."

"Are we sneaking out now?"

"No. Ruby is, because I pointed out there's another door right behind her table. You and I are officially going to the powder room. No sneaking." Rose expertly steered

the two of them through the halls of the Grand Colony, rose petals fluttering out of her updo and a cloud of Givenchy Organza floating in her wake.

“I don’t really understand why we’re sneaking anywhere.” Having drowned most of her confusion and sorrow in the vodka before even touching the penne carbonara with chicken, Sasha was finding life to be very difficult to cope with indeed.

“I have no idea. But she clearly wants to leave, and Danny was sitting next to her nodding, so it’s my duty as the oldest sibling to help execute any kind of sneaky plan. This ain’t my first rodeo.” She winked, blue eyes twinkling. “I don’t think either of you are fit to drive, so I am assuming someone has arranged transportation to wherever it is you’re supposed to go. Let’s go see if Ruby’s made it out to the front steps.”

Ruby was indeed pacing in her satin and velvet confection, her fire-engine red updo looking a bit wispy and droopy and her eyes hazy with the wine Sasha had been watching her drink. “Rosie, thank you.”

“No problem. It’s my job.” Kissing both of them on the cheek, Rose gathered up the hem of her deep pink gown and sailed back inside. “Oh, look, this must be your ride pulling up now. Have fun, you two.”

“Have fun? What did she mean by that, I wonder?” Sasha mused as Ruby dragged her into a little Nissan driven by a cheerful looking elderly woman.

“What she said,” Ruby chirped out, about two seconds before she lunged across the back seat, grabbed Sasha by the lapels, and hauled her in for a deep, steamy kiss.

Sasha’s mind seemed to splinter and scatter like a dropped glass under the heat of Ruby’s lips and tongue. Hunger was all she could think as her fingers curled into the slippery satin at Ruby’s waist, as her back arched away from the car door. She

wanted nothing in this moment more than to be as close to Ruby as possible. Today, this time, the thought of stopping to talk didn't even cross her mind. She only wanted, and a tiny growl slipped out as Ruby bit her bottom lip gently and tugged.

"Ahem." In the driver's seat, the little old lady was clearing her throat. "I don't mind if you two strip down and go right at it, but I don't want the cops pulling us over, so wouldja mind buckling yourselves in?"

No matter what Danny had said, 'talking' was not Ruby's priority at the moment.

She kicked her bedroom door behind the two of them, the sound echoing through the completely empty house. With one hand she deftly twisted the doorknob lock. Her other hand had a firm grip around Sasha's necktie, and she used it to drag her over to the bed.

After Lillian's seatbelt safety moment in the Uber, they'd spent the ride back to the Fierelli house in a state of quietly giggly, almost-but-not-quite-touching tension, hands close enough to feel each other's warmth and the electric crackle of nerves between them. She hadn't dared touch or kiss Sasha again. She wouldn't have been able to stop and despite Lillian's racy suggestion, she wasn't inclined to ravish anyone in the back seat of a Nissan. Especially not with a woman who might have played canasta with her grandma watching.

But now, they were free. There was no conversation, they just needed to touch.

Ruby took Sasha's face in her hands as they tumbled into her bed and let herself indulge in another of those toe-curling kisses that had been replaying in the movie theater of her imagination since the night of the joint bachelor party. She managed to ease Sasha's suit jacket off and toss it to the floor.

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When Sasha pulled back to look at her, dread pooled in Ruby's stomach. Please don't say we need to talk again...

But Sasha only looked deeply into her eyes for a long, taut moment and asked, "Rubes. Are you sure?"

"Are you? I think we know this has to happen." Ruby countered, doing her best to square her shoulders against the bed pillows. "I brought you here. Was that not clear?"

Swallowing hard, Sasha smiled and took a deep breath. "Got it."

Before Ruby could respond, blink, or even take her own breath, Sasha had lifted her breasts out of the boned velvet top of her dress and, with lips and tongue and wet fingertips, had her nipples standing to attention in seconds. Ruby gasped and her hips bucked upwards. She grabbed Sasha's shoulders and clung on for dear life as whirls and sparks of pleasure flooded her body.

She couldn't help the whimper that slipped from her mouth when Sasha pulled away to sit back. But frustration melted into quiet awe as Sasha, more confident than Ruby had ever seen her outside of a kitchen, slowly unbuttoned her shirt, her eyes fastened on Ruby's as she pulled it off and tossed it to the floor. She had a black binder on underneath that she struggled slightly to pull off; her skin was red here and there with compression marks. Ruby sat up to trace her fingers along them.

"Does it hurt?"

Sasha's eyes were dark and half-lidded as she watched Ruby's wandering fingers. "Most of the time, no. It's like a hug. Sometimes it chafes, like today. But it's not a big deal."

Leaning forward, Ruby kissed one of the red marks. Goosebumps bloomed along Sasha's ribcage and overhead, she moaned softly. Ruby lay her palm over the pebbled skin and looked up to meet Sasha's gaze. They'd never been so naked together, and they were only half undressed. "I want to see the rest of you. I want to see all of you."

Sasha licked her lips. "I want to undress you," she replied, her voice husky.

She started with the pins and flowers in Ruby's hair, plucking them free one by one and tossing them onto the bedside table with tinny little plinks. Gradually, locks of Ruby's hair tumbled down in silky crimson ribbons over her shoulders and bared breasts.

When every pin was gone, Sasha led Ruby to stand up in front of the mirror on the back of the door. With care, she inched the zipper down on Ruby's dress. Ruby watched, mesmerized, as the dress was pushed to her feet in a puddle of satin. Her strapless bra was unhooked and discarded, her black silk pantyhose removed with reverence and kisses down the length of her thighs and calves.

She'd never felt so much like a goddess before. The tingles shot through her body like an ocean of electricity.

All that was left were her lacy black panties. Sasha was still in her trousers and shoes, still on her knees. Before Ruby could say a word, Sasha had leaned forward to press a kiss right on the damp gusset of the panties. Pulling them aside, she worked her tongue between the warm lips of Ruby's pussy, the tip going right for her clit. With a sharp surprised breath, Ruby buried her hand in Sasha's curly hair and held on for

dear life.

Her entire world was that nimble tongue, the sucking lips, the teeth that nipped at the tender skin. Fingers slipped into where she was wet with desire, one, then two, pumping into her as Sasha licked and sucked at her clit. All of her senses were overloaded; the smell of sex, the feel of Sasha's curls under her palm and Sasha's fingers inside her body, the gasps in her mouth and the sounds of Sasha moaning and sucking between her legs. It felt so natural, it felt so good.

"Fuck me harder, I need it so bad," Ruby moaned.

Without hesitation, Sasha quickened the pace, fucking Ruby deeper, harder, faster, every thrust jolting her body. The slick wetness of her core melted away around her.

Ruby wasn't a virgin—she'd had great sex before, but for the first time in her life, she thought the word transcendent applied to the experience. No one had made her feel like this, so revered, so good, so sexy.

Her legs gave out when the build up took over her body and hit her like a hurricane. Sasha guided her safely down to the ground with her free hand, her fingers still working within Ruby as wave after wave of pure pleasure pulsed through her.

"You are so fucking wet," Sasha groaned as she worshipped Ruby's body.

Ruby bit her lip, edging her body closer into Sasha's. "Don't stop fucking me, I'm going to cum so hard," Ruby hummed.

Sasha's body pressed harder over Ruby, her fingers stretching, fucking, filling her. She kissed her way down to Ruby's swollen clit, desperate to give it attention.

As the circles traced around her wetness, she felt Ruby tighten around her fingers.

She felt the almighty orgasm crash through her body as her body melted into a clump of fuzzy joy.

Awareness returned to her as they lay tangled on the pile of fine fabrics that had been her gown. Sasha had eased her hand free and was holding Ruby in her arms, against her warm, bare breasts. Ruby could feel her heart racing, that lovely and generous heart. “You good?” Sasha asked softly, pressing a kiss to Ruby’s temple.

“Amazing,” Ruby breathed, enjoying the feeling of being truly cared for. “I guess we’ve taken this fake relationship thing to the next level, right?”

But then she felt bereft as Sasha stood up and pulled Ruby to her feet after her. “Maybe we should talk about this with clear heads...”

“Aw,” Ruby sighed. She’d hoped the cuddles would go on a bit longer.

To her surprise, Sasha led her to the bed and sat her down, then found a T-shirt and pulled it on. “Sit tight,” she advised.

“What for?” Ruby glanced around. “Should I get dressed, too?”

“Absolutely not!” Sasha looked shocked. “No, I said sit tight. I’m going downstairs for snacks and water. I don’t know about you, but I didn’t eat a lot before you dragged me away from the wedding.” She grinned. “We’re both going to need more energy if we want to take full advantage of this empty house. I’m not finished with you.”

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Ruby lifted an eyebrow. Ah. She reclined seductively on the bed, letting her red hair cascade down around her. To her immense delight, Sasha swallowed hard. “Full advantage, you say?”

“Uh...”

“Ma keeps the reusable shopping bags in the pantry,” Ruby advised. “Grab one. You’re gonna need to bring back lots of snacks.”

She couldn’t quite believe how things had developed, but at the same time, she couldn’t imagine another way. This felt good. Really fucking good.

11

“So, tell me. How come you wear a binder sometimes?” Ruby pulled off a gooey slice of mushroom and onion pizza from the pie in front of her. “I didn’t know you did that.”

Sasha shrugged, picking at a slice of mortadella on her own pie. “I just like how I look when I wear it under certain types of clothing.” She paused, considering how to word her feelings. She didn’t have the facility to describe the way that Ruby did. “Sometimes I like being a little girly, sometimes I want to be more in touch with my butch side. You know?”

“I don’t know, I have always been pretty firmly on the very girly side of things, but I understand that what makes you feel like yourself can be different things on different days.” Ruby gestured to the oversized Culinary Institute of America sweatshirt that

she'd pilfered out of Sasha's suitcase and worn today. With a grin, she continued. "For example, today I feel very much like myself while I'm wearing your clothes."

If Sasha had been standing, she'd have gone weak in the knees. As it was, her heart rate felt like it was doubling and tripling in record time. She managed a weak smile and kept picking at her pizza.

Had it really been less than 24 hours since they'd had sex for the first time? Things felt both like they were moving unbelievably fast and like they were falling exactly into place. She had everything she'd wanted since the first day she'd laid eyes on Ruby, and it was all going so exactly right, she was petrified. And they had even really addressed what had happened yet. They had just continued on as normal ignoring the world around them, ignoring the smell of sex that had filled their minds, bodies, and the room.

One minute she'd been sitting at a wedding reception surrounded by Ruby's family and drowning her sorrows in vodka. The next she was literally deep inside of Ruby and savoring the taste of her warm, sweet wetness. And it had been magical, from that moment and through the hours of her bringing Ruby to one delicious orgasm after another. One wasn't enough; she didn't think any amount of time with her naked would be enough.

She'd never had to gently move Ruby's hand away from her breasts or crotch, like she'd had to do with so many of her other lovers who didn't understand that Sasha's love language was acts of service. She found her pleasure in the joy of getting her partners off, in the tastes and scents and sounds of their sexual bliss. It was the way she'd always been, but in the past, she'd often try and try to give her partners what they wanted, but it never felt a hundred percent right.

Ruby had simply let her give all she had in the service of worshipping Ruby, in caressing her beautiful full breasts, in teasing her nipples to attention, in sucking

gently on her clit. There'd been no pouting about feeling guilty for not reciprocating. Only a gasping, grasping, arching, wrung out and happy Ruby, face flushed and blue eyes sparkling as she gazed adoringly up at Sasha from the pillows.

They'd probably have to have a talk about it later, but for now, Sasha could only marvel at how perfectly that first time together had gone. If she believed in soulmates, every conviction she had had would have been confirmed with a vengeance after last night.

"Earth to Sasha." Ruby waved a hand in front of her face. "Hey, you've got to eat your pie. Papa Joe back there is going to get his feelings hurt if you don't, and then I don't get to come back here ever again." She jerked a thumb over her shoulder to indicate a watchful Italian grandpa glaring at them from the kitchen doors. "Eat, eat, how you gonna get a girlfriend if you don't eat?"

Love had a way of absolutely killing her appetite, but Sasha gamely ate her way through three-quarters of her spinach and mortadella pie with extra mozzarella, because she absolutely could not be the reason for anything even remotely unpleasant happening to the woman she adored.

"Down you get, lass." Declan's strong hands circled Nicola's cinched waist, and before she knew aught, she was being lifted down from the back of her beautiful chestnut mare as if she weighed no more than a feather.

They'd ridden hard and long into the night after escaping her father from Auld Alisdair's cottage. She still couldn't quite believe that they'd managed it, that Declan's men had turned up in time to outnumber her father's pitifully small guard force and allow them time to complete the marriage rite and get away.

It was three days yet to Inverary, she knew. But she was exhausted from the events of the day, and when she'd nearly led her poor mare into a tree face-first, Declan had

known they had to stop for the night. He'd led her to to a tiny, empty crofter's hut in the woods, and as she slipped down to the ground with his help, she eyed it and him dubiously.

"It's nae castle, lass, but for as tired as you are, it'll be a palace." Gently, he led her forward to the door. "I've stayed here many a night, it's clean and comfortable, if a bit scarce on luxuries like food. Still, there's a clear river near here for water, and I'll catch us some fish for dinner." He flashed her the bright smile that always made her fall in love with him again. "Nae worries, I'll get the fire going and cook them, I don't expect you've had much experience cleaning and gutting fish."

"But Declan, it's..." She glanced through the window of the hut, to see a small, plain bed, a rough wooden table, and not much else. "It's our wedding night."

He looked at her in confusion for a moment, and then nodded. "Ah. Nae, lass. I wouldna have our wedding night here. You're my Lady of Inverary now. I'll take you home, let you have a long bath to soak away the soreness. You'll have a good dinner and time to rest and then..." His voice dropped low. "Then, lass, then we'll have a proper wedding night."

"Have I told you lately how much I loooooove your work?" Sasha's arms encircled Ruby's waist and she hooked her chin over Ruby's shoulder. "You're so good."

Ruby wriggled in her chair and blushed with pleasure. "Thank you."

"I can't wait to see what you write when they get to Inverary." She spun the desk chair around and braced her hands on the arms of it, a sly grin on her face. "You want some inspiration?"

"Sash, my family is literally right downstairs." She loved it when Sasha was bold and naughty, though. It was so unexpected when you considered how diffident and shy

Sasha was in day-to-day life. But in the two days that they'd been sleeping together, a new to Ruby side of her friend—lover, she supposed now—had emerged, one who was a little dominant, whose entire focus was on Ruby and Ruby's pleasure, who took the lead and made insinuating quips and who, it seemed, was all but insatiable.

Any time they were alone for even a moment, Sasha had her hands on Ruby. Even when they weren't alone, actually, she reflected. The PDA they'd blushinglly discussed and practiced on the trip to New York came easily to them both now, the hand holding, the quick kisses, snuggling on the basement couch watching movies with the family.

She liked it. She was happy, so incredibly happy in a way she'd never thought she could experience. And from such an unexpected source. Now that she was paying attention, she felt almost ashamed that she hadn't seen the potential of this from Sasha before. She hadn't been looking.

Something did nag at her, though. Things were going well. Really, really well. Almost perfectly, too fairy-tale. Surrounded by the love and acceptance of her family, with a generous lover in her bed each night, one who knew precisely how to take care of her and what she wanted—it was exactly, beautifully perfect. And Ruby knew full well as a writer that nothing was this perfect—nothing that could last, anyway.

They were leaving tomorrow. Emerging from their cozy little romantic wedding week bubble. What then? They'd be supported by their Lounge family, to be sure, if they returned home pink-cheeked and hand in hand. But otherwise, the mundane was sure to intrude and dull the sparkle of what they had now. How long would they last? And what about their friendship if they didn't? Could this ruin everything if it doesn't work out? Ruby's inner commitment-phobic anxiety started to bubble.

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Maybe her brother had been right. Maybe they should have done more talking the other day. Maybe they should talk now. There was so much more at stake than she'd fully considered when she decided to explore the possibility that Sasha might have feelings for her. She didn't want to hurt Sasha, not at all, but her feet were definitely starting to feel a little icy. She didn't want to lose?—

“You look tense, Rubes.” Sasha walked over to the bedroom door and, with a sly smile, twisted the lock in the doorknob. Within seconds, she had Ruby out of the chair and laid out across the bed, breathless. Her hand went right to the button and zip on Ruby's jeans. “Let me fix that for you real quick, before they call us down for dinner...”

As Sasha's hand slid under the waistband of her panties and began to play with her clit, everything Ruby was worried about disappeared in a red-tinged fog of desire. Biting her lip, she closed her eyes and gave herself over to the pure erotic pleasure of the moment.

12

“Call me when you land,” Elena instructed, eyes darting between Ruby and Sasha. “I don't care which one. Hell, both of you call. Just to be sure.”

“We will, Ma.” Ruby hugged her mother tight, blinking back the tears that had been threatening to spill since they started the trek to JFK an hour ago.

“And Sasha, you come back anytime. Bring Ruby with you.” Elena hugged Sasha tight and pulled back to take her face in her hands, beaming with joy. “We'd love to

see you again. We really would!”

Dom gathered his younger daughter into his arms and gave her a bear hug. “You don’t come home enough. Let’s see you again before the next family wedding, huh?”

“I’ll try, Pops.” She inhaled deeply, taking in the smell of leather, strong peppermint candy, and Dial soap that always clung to him.

He held her closer. “She’s a good lady, that Sasha,” he whispered. “Make sure you keep her, eh, Rubes? I mean it.”

“I’ll do my best.” The nauseating tangle of emotion that she’d been experiencing since the night of the wedding bubbled up again in her stomach. Happiness, the joy of Sasha being beloved by her family, the confusion in feeling like she was with Sasha while knowing she wasn’t but coming so close to wishing that she could be, the apprehension of how they’d navigate everything once they got home. What was going to happen next? Did she even know what she wanted to happen next?

“Rubes?” Her father had pulled back and was staring at her in concern.

“Yeah! Yeah.” She ruffled his salt and pepper hair. “You got it, Pops. We’ll be back.” She gave him one more hug. “Love you.”

“Love you too, my girl.” He gave her a gentle push. “Go on, that TSA line looks long.”

The tears weren’t going to stay held back much longer. With another hug for her mother and some big waves at everyone, Ruby grabbed Sasha’s hand and spun on her booted heel to walk briskly to the TSA line.

“Hey. You okay?” Sasha wiggled her hand free to sling an arm around Ruby’s

shoulder and rubbed her upper arm. “Dumb question. Sorry. Of course not.”

“I mean, yes? And no. It’s not a dumb question.” Ruby offered a watery smile as tears began to dribble from her eyes. “I’m ready to see Winston again, ready to be back at the Lounge, ready to go home to my apartment and give Natalie her thank you gifts and get all the gossip. I love living in LA.” She swallowed the lump in her throat, and it hurt. “But you know, my dad’s right, I don’t go home enough, once or twice a year at most. I feel like even though we spent a week there, it wasn’t enough time. And I hardly saw Danny, he was so busy with wedding stuff. Time just passes by so quickly.”

“He said he and Angela would come out and visit soon, though.” Sasha said, and Ruby could tell she was trying to sound reassuring. “Maybe they’ll talk your parents into coming out, too. Wouldn’t it be nice to have them for Christmas or something?”

There was something about the way Sasha was wording it that rubbed Ruby’s jangled nerves the wrong way. It was very... assuming. Very couple-ish. Ruby needed to ease out of the shimmering fairytale bubble and take stock of herself, of what she wanted, where they could go from here, where they should go.

Because the cold feet hadn’t let up, and she was starting to feel slightly panicked and confined as Sasha seemed to step so naturally into the role of girlfriend. But this was what Ruby had wanted her entire life, wasn’t it? This warm and cozy supportive kind of love? The kind of stuff she liked best to write about? The love she’d basically been manifesting while writing her books, it seemed like she had it now, and all she wanted was to take a few steps back and catch a deep breath, a moment to think.

Swallowing hard, Ruby ducked out from under Sasha’s arm and took two steps away.

Surprised, Sasha blinked at the empty space where Ruby had been, and slowly lowered her arm. “Rubes?”

“Yeah?” The smile Ruby was offering her was too bright, too artificial. Sasha moved forward, hand outstretched, and was surprised again when Ruby backed away and her smile grew harder.

Alarm bells began to go off in the back of her brain. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” But it was too firm, and that firmness didn’t match up with the frenetic gleam that had appeared in Ruby’s eyes.

She tried to stay calm. “You’re jumpy. Kind of all over the place all of a sudden. I’m worried, that’s all.”

“Well, don’t be.” Ruby handed her boarding pass and ID to the guy at the TSA podium, who quickly passed her through. Briskly, Ruby walked over to the indicated line without even a glance back at Sasha.

An ice-cold pit began to open up in Sasha’s stomach. Sheknewit had all been going too well. She braced herself, in an attempt to wrap her heart up from what felt like an upcoming break.

Quietly, she went through her own security procedures. Shoes off, electronics out, liquids bag in the bin. From the corner of her eye, she watched as Ruby moved with that uncharacteristic efficiency and quickness to go through the metal detector and grab her belongings. By the time Sasha had finished and was bringing her shoes over to the bench Ruby was standing by, Ruby had been standing and looking ready to bolt for a full two minutes.

Sasha took her time getting herself together, trying to figure out what was happening as she laced up her sneakers. Ruby was nearly vibrating out of her skin with nerves, so Sasha knew she had to tread carefully. She picked up her backpack. “Our gate is?—”

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“This way.” Ruby set off once more at a brisk pace, leaving Sasha scrambling to keep up.

They didn’t stop at any of the shops or kiosks. Sasha could have used a bottle of overpriced airport water, but she was almost afraid to say anything at all to Ruby at this point. She gripped the straps of her backpack tight, so tight her knuckles ached.

What had gone so wrong, so quickly?

Did I say the wrong thing? Sasha thought to herself as she recounted the previous conversations in her mind.

They arrived at their gate and Ruby plopped down in a seat next to an older woman. She slung her backpack into the seat next to her and crossed her arms over her chest.

Well. Signals didn’t get much clearer than that. Sasha sat down across from Ruby and eased her own backpack around into her lap. All she could do was hug it for support as she went over the last couple of hours or so in her mind. They’d left the Fierelli house with Dom and Elena this morning, and in the car, Ruby had been her usual cuddly, friendly self. At the airport, she’d been understandably upset about saying goodbye to her parents. And then all of a sudden, she was... whatever this was now. Standoffish, hard, walled off in a way Sasha honestly couldn’t remember seeing in her before. And it had been so, so sudden. Clearly Sasha had done something wrong, but she just couldn’t put a finger on what it could have been. She shrank into herself and tried to shake off her anxiety.

The minutes until boarding crawled by, but finally, mercifully, it began. They were in

the third boarding group, thanks to Ruby's frequent flyer miles. Meekly, Sasha trailed after Ruby. How were they going to get through the next several hours? She was going to have to make Ruby talk, a task she did not, for once, relish.

Only when they had their backpacks up in the bin, their seatbelts buckled, the safety demonstration watched—with too much concentration on Ruby's part, Sasha thought—and the plane was taxiing down the runway and therefore, every chance for Ruby to escape was theoretically gone... as the plane lifted off, only then did Sasha open her mouth. "Ruby..."

"Don't, Sash." The sweet, dreamy voice she loved so well was gone, replaced by steel. Sasha looked down at Ruby's hands, which were clutching the armrests of her seat, white-knuckled. She gently touched one, and it was a dagger to her heart when Ruby snatched it away.

She took a deep breath. "Ruby, come on. I know something's wrong. What happened? What did I do? Please just tell me."

"Nothing, I," Ruby's eyes clenched shut. "Sash, please. Please, don't push. Not right now."

"But I want to help, I want to fix it, I can't stand you being like this with me," Sasha whispered, panic clawing its way up her throat. How had everything gone so wrong so quickly? What had gone wrong? "I need to know, Rubes, before we get home. I don't want us to start off on the wrong foot."

Sucking in a deep breath through her nose, Ruby opened her eyes and looked straight ahead. "That is the problem, Sash," she said, her voice low. "There is no us, not like that. You're moving way too fast, and I need you to back off a second. I'm freaking out here."

The words did take Sasha aback, literally made her lean back in shock. “Wait. What?”

Ruby paused before turning to Sasha to take her hands and hold them tight. “You are my best friend. The last few days have been... I can’t tell you enough how amazing they’ve been.”

“Then why are you being like this?” Sasha asked, unable to stop the tears of hurt from springing to her eyes. “I thought everything was perfect. That we were on the same page, you finally saw how good we could be together...”

“Finally?” Ruby sat up straighter in her plane seat. “I see. My brother was right, and I really was the last to know.”

“To know what?” Sasha was bewildered by the entirety of this conversation. Her stomach was utterly in knots.

“That you had—have—feelings for me. And everyone knows it. But I didn’t, because you didn’t tell me.” Ruby let go of one of Sasha’s hands and rubbed her forehead. “I had to guess. I should have talked to you about it before we slept together. But...” She held Sasha’s gaze steadily. “Would you havetoldme? Even if I asked you directly?”

“I...” She had no answer. She’d held back her feelings for so long, too afraid of being hurt. But now it seemed like she was going to get hurt all the same. How stupid had she been?

Ruby sighed. “Sasha. Believe me, I have loved this fairy tale whirlwind. But I need time to adjust, to catch up to where you are. It feels like you’re hundred steps ahead.”

“So you don’t feel the same way about me?” The tears were trickling now, salty and

hot on her cheeks. “Why did you... why did we do this, then? If you don’t have feelings for me?”

“Of course I have feelings for you!” Ruby cried out, gripping Sasha’s hands again. “But you’ve had time and space to think about your feelings, and I haven’t yet! It’s all a big ball of happy pink love-bubble bliss, and it’s a lot for me to think about, and I just want to be sure. I don’t think it’s too much to ask to just let me catch my breath.” She paused, and bit her lip. “Did you think we were just going to fall into this together and go back to LA as a couple?”

Sasha could barely admit to herself that she thought that they had done exactly that. That she’d let herself get swept up into the perfect fairytale she thought she’d finally gotten. That she’d just assumed Ruby had understood.

How humiliating.

The Fasten Seat Belts sign went off. Sasha began to fumble with the buckle of her seat belt. Ruby grabbed her hand. “What are you doing?”

“I need to find a new seat. I can’t do this, I can’t sit next to you, not when... I feel... I can’t.” Getting to her feet, Sasha snatched up her coat and backpack. Tears blinded her eyes, and she hastily wiped them away so she could find a flight attendant.

A blue-blazered young man touched her arm. “Can I help you?”

“I need a new seat,” Sasha blurted out, as she felt Ruby’s eyes boring into her back. “Please, I wouldn’t ask, but I’ve just had an argument with my...” The tears flooded back as she realized she had no idea how to refer to Ruby.

To her great relief, the flight attendant seemed to grasp the situation immediately. “I have a fully empty row just over here. Follow me?”

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In moments, he had her settled into her new window seat so far in the back of the plane, she couldn't see Ruby at all. Deftly, he supplied her with a snack packet and a Dr. Pepper. "Can I get you anything else?" he asked, sympathy in his eyes.

"Double vodka on the rocks and a pack of tissues?" she asked, somehow able to muster up a meager half-smile.

"Done." He paused, his face thoughtful, and then he squeezed her shoulder. "It's going to be okay. I'll be right back with your drink and your tissues."

She didn't wait for him to return before she gave in to silent, intense sobs and more hurt than she'd ever thought possible.

13

Sasha was not answering her calls.

Okay, Ruby admitted that she couldn't be too surprised by that. Not after she'd seen so much hurt in Sasha's eyes that day on the plane. The unanswered texts, too, were only to be expected. Same for the way knocks on Sasha's apartment door went seemingly unheard.

Ignoring her at the Indigo Lounge, though, that... Ruby hadn't thought that was possible.

She'd never once felt lonely in the Lounge. From the first day she walked through the door, it had felt like a second home and a found family had dropped right into her lap.

But now, tucked away into a booth far in a shadowy back corner of the Lounge, she felt isolated and alone.

Part of that was purposeful. She wasn't really in a mood to talk to anyone until she'd straightened things out with Sasha, so she was avoiding everyone as much as possible. And the rest of it was that her book was coming due, and she was stuck on how to finish it, so a lot of her time was spent staring blankly at her laptop screen and eating snacks.

So, she was either not leaving her house, or she was slinking and skulking her way into the far dark reaches of the Lounge with her laptop, knowing Esme at least saw her, but was taking the unspoken cue to leave her be. Natalie came by to take her food orders and kept conversation to a blissful minimum both at the Lounge and at home.

Ruby was currently eating smoked salmon and pesto on toast, with a plain Diet Coke on the side. She hadn't thought about it when she ordered the appetizer, but tasting the pesto took her right back to that afternoon at Villa Primavera, to the moment that Sasha had revealed her tree nut allergy, the reason why the pesto tasted a little different than what Ruby had been used to all her life.

She flushed with shame now to remember it. To remember that she hadn't known something that was a fairly important detail to know about someone she cared about, who she called her best friend... and there was so much she hadn't known! Sasha had known so much about her in contrast, had paid attention and remembered things. Her family, where she went to high school, what she liked to drink and eat.

Speaking of eating...Ruby surveyed her meal soberly. It was delicious, of course, because Sasha had made it. Everything Sasha made was exquisite, thoughtfully crafted and composed of high-quality ingredients. She had no complaints about her perfect little meal.

But it wasn't personal, it wasn't something off menu made especially and only for her. She hadn't realized how accustomed she'd gotten to the special little touches, the treats and gifts, the twists on a menu-listed dish that made it uniquely made for Ruby. Nothing was made with her in mind, and she missed that, the knowing that someone was thinking about her, taking care of her.

Had she ever properly thanked Sasha for any of that? Or had she simply taken her entirely for granted? Every little gesture of love—and she was certain now that they had been exactly that—had they gone by without Ruby acknowledging them? A flush of shame heated up her face.

Still. For all of the things she was coming to realize in the time she and Sasha weren't speaking, she still felt she was right to put the brakes on Sasha's headlong race towards a committed relationship. She owed Sasha an apology for not thinking and talking things through before dragging her into bed, for sure. But that lack of thought was exactly what got them into this mess, and she just wished Sasha would let her explain it better. She blushed again to think how clumsily she'd handled things that day on the plane. How mean and snappish she'd been, how she hadn't adequately adjusted in time to keep herself from hurting the kindest, most loving and generous person she'd ever known.

She had been right, but she had not been kind, and her clumsy panic might have lost her the best thing she could have ever had.

A tall glass full of mango-passionfruit milkshake slid onto the table in front of her, and Ruby's heart leapt into her throat with hope to see it. She jerked her head upwards, an apology already filling her mouth.

But only Natalie's sorrowful gaze met hers. "Sorry," her roommate said, sliding into the seat on the other side of the booth. "It's just from me. I wanted to give you something that might cheer you up."

“I don’t deserve it.” Ruby shoved the glass back across the table. “Thank you, though.”

“Drink it, Rubes. I don’t like mango, it’ll just go to waste.” Natalie pushed the glass back. “How are you doing?”

“Haven’t written a word in days, my best friend isn’t talking to me, and I am a selfish, self-centered bitch,” Ruby replied, sucking the whipped cream topping off of the milkshake. “So, you know. Great.”

“I don’t think you’re any more selfish than any of the rest of us, but you’ll have to take that up with a therapist. The writing will come back once you stop stressing about Sasha. And that—” she held up a hand to forestall Ruby’s next protest. “That will come, too. Sasha is too nice to be mad at you forever.”

“I really hurt her feelings, Nat. She has every right to hate me.”

“Okay, I’m sure she doesn’t hate you. But yeah, okay, maybe it will take time for her to come around. She will, though, Ruby.” Natalie leaned across the table to grab her hand. “Something like what you two have can’t be broken apart that easily.”

“Well, I don’t know what we have, or what I want us to have, Nat. Which is also part of the problem.” Ruby sighed. “For a romance writer, I am absolute crap at the love game myself.”

“You’ve never been faced with a serious contender before,” Natalie pointed out wryly. “You write fantasies; nobody’s love life is really like that! Of course you’re not an expert at real actual love.”

“Ouch.” The point made sense, but still hurt. “I mean, I thought I was writing the kind of relationship I wanted?”

“Were you?” Natalie sat back, eyes wide. “Scotsmen sexily abducting their barely-legal brides to get married in the night? Lesbians who argue-fuck their way through life? Oh, that one experimental sci-fi-slash-literary one you wrote with the two guys who were soulmates that kept meeting in different lives at the wrong time? These are the relationships you want?”

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“Not that!” Ruby waved her hands around, exasperated. “You know not that. The little things I wrote in the relationships, even the ones without happy endings. Quiet moments. Snuggles. Little thoughtful gestures.”

Natalie blinked. “So... from what you told me about the week in New York... that’s what you got?”

“But I didn’t realize I had it! I had it for years. If I didn’t notice I had it, did I really want it?” Ruby shoved her hands up into her hair and clunked her elbows on the booth table. “And you know what else? It has been an entire week of Sasha not speaking to me. We weren’t even officially in a relationship and we’re going through a breakup and I lost my friend. What happens if we fix this, get together, and then actually break up? I’m already sad about losing my friend and I hope it’s temporary. I don’t want to lose my best friend for good!”

“Rubes, that’s a risk in any good relationship. You should be friends with your lover. That’s what makes it a good relationship. My parents were friends, your brother and his wife were friends—think about every solid relationship you’ve seen.”

“Esme and Nora weren’t friends,” Ruby pointed out, rolling her eyes up to look at Natalie. “Deborah and Holly weren’t friends. They just found crazy wild love out of nowhere! And then there’s Goldie and Cam, they definitely were not friends.”

“Ok, ok, I mean, there are different types of love, and you didn’t want the crazy wild type anyway. Stop with the what ifs and maybes, Rubes!” Natalie reached over and tugged Ruby’s hands out of her hair. “You know what you’re great at? Plotting. Overthinking. Maybe what you actually need is to give that a rest for once. Just accept

that the universe has handed you what most of us would kill to have. I mean, do you love Sasha?"

"I love her. What I don't know is if I'm in love with her. I'm..." Ruby swallowed. "I think I'm too afraid to look at it too closely. If I am in love with her, I risk losing my friend. If I'm not in love with her, I hurt her again, and I risk losing my friend. I don't want to lose my friend, and above anything else, I don't want to hurt her anymore."

"So it's better to definitely not have the love you want rather than take any risks at all?"

Ruby glanced across the Lounge just in time to see Sasha emerging from the kitchen with a plate of food for Esme, who often forgot to eat. She looked sad, and walled off, and Ruby's heart ached for her.

She had never intended for things to go this way. They were supposed to just have a fun week and get her family off her back. Everything had gone so wrong... and yet, for a few days there, they'd been so perfect. Everything she'd ever wanted. Did she have it in her to pursue getting that back?

And did it even matter if she did? "She won't let me talk to her anyway."

Natalie pursed her lips together and looked thoughtful. "You trust me?"

"With my dog and my life," Ruby affirmed, mystified.

With a short nod, Natalie slid out of the booth seat and grabbed Ruby's now-empty milkshake glass. "Go home. And give me a few days. Focus on your writing."

"But..."

“Go, Rubes. Finish your book. Think about how you feel about Sasha. And leave everything else to me.”

What else was there for her to do? Ruby slid her laptop into her messenger bag, left cash on the table for her bill, and snuck out of the Indigo Lounge, wondering exactly what Natalie had up her sleeve.

“I wish you’d talk to me.”

Sasha paused her wiping down of the grill and turned to look at Esme. Her friend and boss was leaning against the kitchen door of the Lounge, arms crossed over her chest. Sympathy gleamed from her warm brown eyes, making Sasha turn away hastily and apply herself even more strenuously to her task. Sweet, warm-hearted Esme had a way of making people spill their guts whether they wanted to or not.

She chose her words carefully when she finally replied, keeping things simple. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Oh, bullshit, Sash.” Esme tsked. “You’ve holed yourself up in the kitchen since you came back from New York. Ruby either doesn’t come in at all, which is very unlike her, or she sneaks in here and goes off to hide in a back booth and does not talk to anyone. I ain’t stupid.” She sounded offended. “So please don’t insult my intelligence. Something is wrong, and everyone knows it. And we’d all like to help, but one of you has to tell us what’s up.”

Sasha scrubbed hard at an imaginary grease spot on the grill. Of course, she’d known that eventually people would catch on that things had gone wrong between herself and Ruby. Their friends had actually given them a lot more leeway and time to deal with it than she’d expected; if she’d been the betting sort, she would normally put good money on their nosy gang of affectionate gossipmongers giving her and Ruby a day before they started asking questions. It had been nearly a week. She’d have lost

that money, but she was impressed at their restraint.

Still, she wasn't exactly in a mood to discuss it with anyone. An ache still remained in her chest, a pit in her stomach. The humiliation at having read the situation so, so wrongly was a large and bitter pill to swallow. The hurt at being rejected was a deep wound. Sasha had no idea how she was going to get herself together again.

"Nobody can fix this," she said at last, amazed she could get the words out past the huge lump in her throat. "It's late, E. I need to finish up and go home."

"I've gotten complaints about the food this week, you know," Esme said casually.

Sasha whipped around, mouth dropping open in shock. "You what?!"

"Well, not complaints, per se." Pushing herself off the doorframe, Esme walked into the kitchen and began to pace the tiled floor. "Overheard remarks, I suppose you could call them. There's not as much heart in the food. Something's missing. It's not quite right." She glanced at Sasha. "It's still good, everything is excellent. But people are noticing. So, if you won't talk to me as a friend, can you talk to me as a boss who's got some concerns about your work performance?"

Unbelievable. "E, come on."

"You come on. Spill." Esme turned on the espresso maker, set up a shot, and pulled a cup off of the shelf. Having just cleaned the thing, Sasha groaned in frustration. With a wink, Esme slowly filled her cup and added milk and sugar. "Talk, Sasha. I'm feeling a bit hungry, you want me to start making a sandwich?"

All Sasha could do was throw her hands in the air. "And you'll actually do it."

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“I might even be in the mood for a big, sloppy grilled cheese. With tomato slices. And a bowl of soup—what can I make that takes lots of ingredients?” She began to walk towards the walk-in refrigerator.

Sasha dodged in front of her. “Don’t you dare. I reorganized it yesterday.”

“Then you’d better start talking.” Esme slipped around Sasha and laid a hand on the door handle. “Quickly. My wife is going to come pick me up soon and golly, Sash, she might be hungry too. Usually, we go to the Chinese place but I’m in a cooking mood, now...”

Sasha slumped down on a stool in the corner of the kitchen. “Ugh. Fine. Look, E. It’s nothing. I... read too much into a situation that arose, I made some bad judgment calls. Got my feelings hurt. I’ll get over it.”

Esme spun around to lean against the fridge door, her expression speculative. “And the situation is that you and Ruby slept together without you actually telling her about your feelings, right?”

“Aaaaahhh...” Embarrassment made her squirm, hurt made her shoulders droop further. “Good guess.”

“It wasn’t, actually. Natalie and I have been in cahoots, and Ruby, as you know, doesn’t bottle up her emotions until she explodes.” The gentle teasing smile Esme flashed her took the sting out of the chiding accusation. “You’re both absolutely terrible at communicating, though. You’re awful at listening, and she’s surprisingly unobservant for a writer.”

Sasha jerked her head up. “Hey now. That’s rich, coming from you. Weren’t you and Nora hooking up for weeks without talking about any feelings at all? Sleeping with the enemy and all that?”

“Do you think I learned nothing from the experience?” Esme’s voice was dry and wise. “Oh, buttercup! Life’s much better when you start being honest—with yourself, and others. It was a hard lesson to learn, but a good one. Now, can I be honest with you?”

The very idea made Sasha cringe, but she squared up her shoulders and sat up straight. “Shoot.”

“Good.” Esme pulled up a stool and sat, tossing her long gray braid over her shoulder. “You know, I know, the whole wide world knows now that you’ve loved Ruby for a very long time. But Ruby just figured it out last week, am I right?”

“Yes,” Sasha admitted.

“And she did have to figure it out; you didn’t tell her.” Esme cocked her head. “Would you say that might be something she needs time to come to grips with?”

“She did say that,” Sasha replied slowly. Remembering that day still made her stomach churn, but she had to be fair.

“But you, my big-hearted, all-in friend, you jumped right into couplehood with both feet, am I right? You were half-in already with the fool-the-family charade, so hooking up must have seemed like a green light to you.”

“Well, of course it did!” The words burst out of her, propelled by the unfairness of it all. “We almost hooked up one night, but I hit the brakes, E. I said we needed to talk about it first but we didn’t because...” Her mouth was dry as she remembered.

“Because I couldn’t tell her that if we did, it meant something for me. But when we did actually get together, I asked her if she was sure! And she said that she’d brought me back to her house and wasn’t that clear?”

Esme leaned forward and patted her cheek. “But you didn’t actually talk about it.”

“It didn’t feel like we needed to at that point, everything was going so well. We were both happy. I thought we were on the same page after all.” She ran a hand through her hair, frustrated. “E, I swear, we were in sync. We were happy. Why wouldn’t she want to keep it going once we got back here?”

“Well, maybe she does! But I’m still not hearing where you talked about it, honey.” Grabbing Sasha’s hands, Esme took a deep breath before she went on. “Look, you two were cuddled up in a cozy nest amongst her family, getting swept up in the romance of a wedding—it wasn’t real life. Frankly, as much of a pie-eyed incurable romantic as Ruby is, I’m amazed she had the fortitude to snap out of it and tell you she needed time to think about things.”

Sasha looked down at her feet. “I guess. It still hurts.”

“I can see that whatever she said, it did hurt you. And I’m sure she feels terrible about it, because Ruby’s not a bad person, and she does care a great deal about you.” Esme squeezed her hands. “I know you, Sasha. I know you feel rejected and hurt and sad, but could you give Ruby a chance to apologize? And maybe you two could actually talk. You’d be surprised at what good, clear communication can do.”

Pulling her hands away, Sasha stood up. “I mean. Maybe. I need another day or two. I have to think about it.”

“Well, all right.” Esme also got to her feet. She glanced at the kitchen doorway. “Nat? You got that? She needs a couple of days.”

“I got it.” The dark-haired barista appeared in the doorway with a friendly smile. “You ready to go pick up some Chinese and I’ll take you home?”

“Wait.” Sasha glanced between the two of them. “I thought it was just us here. I thought Nora was coming to get you.”

“I fibbed.” Esme beamed. “And I told you Natalie and I are in cahoots. You take your two days, Sasha. But just know after that, I’m sending in the big guns.”

“What are the big guns?” Sasha called after them as they sauntered out of the kitchen arm in arm. “E? Hey! What are the big guns?”

“You’ll see,” Esme’s voice floated back into the kitchen.

Declan’s horse thundered through the meadow towards Nicola. Without a second thought, she threw her arm into the air and stumbled to her feet. With a grim look on his face, the fingers of his right hand tangled in the reins, Declan leaned down and wrapped his left arm around her, hauling her off the ground and into his saddle. She had to sit sidesaddle before him and turned to wrap her arms around his waist. Her face, she buried in his chest, breathed in deep to take in the scent of musky sweat, dusty linen, and leather.

They seemed to ride forever and couldn’t talk. Nicola heard only wind rushing, hooves galloping, and Declan’s harsh breathing. She longed to ask him where they were going, how long until they were home, how had he found her?

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But when the steed finally came to a stop, dust clouds billowing around his legs, Nicola looked up at Declan and all thoughts fled her mind. She wanted only to remain safe in his arms, trusting that he would always protect her from danger.

He put a finger under her chin and lifted it higher so that he could meet her frightened gaze with his sober one. “We’re safe for now, lass.”

“But?”

He sighed heavily. “But we cannae go home to Inverary. More of that Low Country despot king’s men will come for you. Your father is too important to his cause, he’ll do anything to keep the man happy. I cannae keep you safe in Scotland.” His eyes darkened. “And ‘tis my duty to keep my lady safe.”

“Only duty?” she blurted out without thinking.

Declan blinked. “Nay, Nicola. ‘Tis also out of love. Surely by now you believe me when I say it?”

After all the trouble she’d caused, she couldn’t quite bring herself to believe she deserved it.

Ruby slapped her laptop screen down. Behind her, Natalie jumped away at the vehemence of the gesture. “Dang, Rubes. Don’t get so hostile on your laptop. Remember the bill last time when you cracked the thing holding the screen in place?”

Burying her hands in her hair, Ruby could only let out an incoherent, guttural...

noise, in response. Something between agroan and a shriek and a growl. It felt like it came up from the deepest pits of her stomach to rip its way through her throat.

Moving carefully, Natalie approached the desk again and lifted the laptop lid. Before Ruby knew what she was up to, Natalie had her hand in hers and was pressing her finger to the keypad to unlock it. “Hey!”

“I just wanted to see what you were writing that pissed you off so bad... ah.” Natalie clucked her tongue. “Got some home truths emerging and hitting a little too close to the heart?”

“Something like that,” Ruby mumbled.

Nat backed up from the desk, grabbing the back of Ruby’s desk chair and swiveling it around to face the end of the bed, where she plopped her bottom down next to Winston. She pulled the chair close and took Ruby’s face in her hands, forcing her to look her in the eyes. “Ruby, you deserve love. You didn’t do as much wrong as you think you did. It is valid to need time to think about what you want. Do I need to get one of those airplane guys to write all this in the sky for you?”

“No! Yes. I don’t know. Does it matter?” Ruby sat back and threw her hands in the air, annoyed. “Sasha still won’t talk to me.”

“She’s going to talk to you tonight,” Natalie announced, leaning back on her hands and grinning smugly.

Ruby could only look at her like she was crazy. “Huh?”

“You said you trusted me, right?” Natalie was ruffling Winston’s ears but kept her merry eyes and smug little grin on Ruby. “With your life and your little dog, too.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to know what’s going on.”

Nat shrugged. “Not much. Esme gave Sash two days to decide if she was going to talk to you again. Well, not so much if as when, but I don’t think Sasha knows it’s as mandatory as that.”

“Is she coming here?” Ruby grabbed frantically at her hair, two days past needing a wash. She cringed at her grubby and very ratty yoga pants and vintage Paula Cole t-shirt. “When?”

“I’m taking you to her, relax.” Natalie grabbed her hands and patted her down. “After the Lounge closes. You’ll have time to clean up, but that’s not the important thing.”

Ruby sniffed in the general direction of her armpits and grimaced. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, dummy! The important thing is, do you know how you feel? What you want to say?”

“I want to tell her I’m sorry. That I miss her. That I do love her, and being without her has been awful.” Ruby pulled a long, deep breath in through her nose and let it back out again. “This week... I realized I felt differently about her than about any of the rest of you. I didn’t understand that was love.” She looked down at her hands. “I still have a lot to figure out, but I don’t want to do any of it without her.”

“And that is partnership, baby.” Standing up, Natalie pulled Ruby to her feet and propelled her towards the bedroom door with a hard shove. “Now! Go wash off your depressed writer stink. Winston and I are going to order pizza and when you get clean, we’ll work up a game plan.”

The Lounge had been closed for an hour, and Sasha was almost done mopping the kitchen floor. It was a task normally left to the rest of the kitchen staff, but for the last

week and a half, she'd preferred to do all the scut work herself as much as possible. It helped to tire her out so she could sleep at night.

It also kept her out of Esme's sight. It was the end of the second day she'd been given to decide if she could forgive Ruby. Esme hadn't come near her all day and Sasha was hoping she'd forgotten, because she still felt tender and afraid. She felt able by now to at least face Ruby, but what could she say? It was terrifying to think that anything she said could be greeted with the snappish, standoffish attitude of rejection that still made her stomach twist.

But she did miss Ruby. For all the hurt and bewilderment at the end of the New York trip, she missed what they'd had before, and what they'd developed along the way. They just had to get on the same page, somehow. Sasha wondered if she would ever be brave enough for that.

As she dipped the mop into her bucket and twisted the handle to wring it out, she heard music start to play out on the dance floor of the Lounge. Cocking her head, she paused to listen in wonder.

Because it was her favorite song.

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Jane Siberry's voice intertwined sweetly with k.d. lang's overhead while Sasha walked out of the kitchen and into the Lounge. The dance floor, instead of being dark as it should be after close, was gently illuminated by the warm twinkling lights running around the second-floor mezzanine.

And as the gentle, swelling piano of *Calling All Angels* continued to fill the room, she saw Ruby standing in the middle of the parquet dance floor. Barefoot, in a long black spaghetti strap dress, her red hair tumbled down her shoulders and her blue eyes apprehensively hopeful behind her glasses. Her mouth was curved in a slight, tentative smile.

When Sasha didn't—couldn't—move further from the kitchen door, the smile faltered, and Ruby bit her bottom lip. There was a vulnerability in the small, nervous gesture, a window that reminded Sasha that Ruby, too, could be hurt as badly as Sasha herself could be. That Ruby, too, yearned for love and romance, and that they shared the same awe and fear of possibly getting it.

Understanding broke through her paralyzing fear of rejection, and Sasha rushed forward, heedless of the fact that she looked and smelled like she'd just spent all day in a hot, busy kitchen. She scooped Ruby up in a hug, relishing the relieved giggles that began to burble from Ruby's lips as she squeezed Sasha back.

They stood in that tight embrace, swaying slightly while the music floated around them. Ruby smelled like flowers, she was a warm, trembling bundle in Sasha's arms, and everything felt right with the world again, like she'd just slipped the last three pieces of a puzzle into place.

“Oh, this feels right,” Ruby breathed, nuzzling Sasha’s neck. “How did I miss it before?” She pulled back and cupped Sasha’s face in her hands. “Sash, I’m sorry. So, so sorry I made such a mess of things. I didn’t mean to hurt you, I hate that I did.”

“Ruby...” She didn’t know what to say.

“No, wait.” Stepping back, Ruby let her hands trail down from Sasha’s face, along her arms, until their hands met and she intertwined their fingers. “I should have talked to you. We were friends—I owed you a talk, not just dragging you into bed.”

“Do you regret...” Sasha began to whisper, unsure she wanted the answer.

“No! No, please, Sash, let me talk, I’m terrible at it, but just let me get to the point.” Ruby took a deep breath. “The second I started to suspect that maybe there were feelings there, I should have asked you. But it was just so good the night of the party, and then there was that one day on your motorcycle...”

That got her attention. “What about that day on my motorcycle?”

Ruby blushed a pretty rosy pink. “Another time. Just... I wanted to be with you. Fully. So, I went for it, and I enjoyed it, and I wanted more of it. I knew the whole time we should have a talk, though. I was pretty sure we weren’t on the same page. But we were in such a nice bubble...”

“It was a nice bubble.” Sasha smiled at the warm, sexy, cuddly memories.

“I was wrong. I handled it wrong, and I shouldn’t have blown up at you. Sash, I’m so sorry I hurt you.” She touched Sasha’s face with gentle fingers. “I don’t ever want to hurt you again. You are my best friend in the whole world, and I love you.”

Being called a best friend took some of the wind out of Sasha’s gradually reinflating

emotional sails. “Best friend.”

“No, no no no no no.” Ruby grabbed her hands again. “We need to get you therapy, I’m worried about the things you focus on. You are my best friend. But if I’ve learned anything this week besides that hurting you is the worst feeling in the world, it’s that I do love you as my best friend... and more. I would like us to see what being more is like, the whole nine.” She held up one hand. “Slowly. I want dates, Sash. I’m not going to just jump in and U-Haul us into a full-on relationship, you and me and my little dog too. Court me.”

“I feel like I’ve been courting you for years already,” Sasha pointed out. “You just didn’t know.”

“And now I do. I don’t want to miss another moment of the experience.” She tilted her head and smiled, the sweet, warm smile that had made Sasha fall for her in the first place. “I’m a romantic, Sash. I want the romance that I write so much about. And I want to give you that romance, too.” She stepped back. “That’s why I had Nat and Esme help me set this up. This big movie moment.”

Sasha grinned. “I love this big movie moment. But how did you know to start it all off with Calling All Angels? How did you know that’s my favorite song?”

Ruby’s eyes went wide. “What? I didn’t. It’s one of mine. I was listening to it while I was getting ready and I thought, this sounds like a perfect song for us. For this moment. So, I put it at the top of the playlist.”

Sasha couldn’t help it. She threw her head back and laughed. “Of course. Of course that’s our song, and we didn’t know it. Perfect.”

“Perfect and we didn’t know it,” Ruby said. “That’s just like us.”

And under the gentle lights of the Indigo Lounge, Sasha gathered Ruby into her arms, knowing they were on the same page at long, long last. She put all the love she'd been carrying in her heart for years into a sweet, slow, melting kiss that curled her toes and made Ruby hum happy little noises into her mouth. Their lips danced as their bodies joined closer. Every connection of their bodies felt like fireworks. Ruby had no idea how she missed this for so long, but all that mattered now was the road ahead of them.

Jane Siberry shifted into Julien Baker, melted into Dar Williams, slowly slid into Girl in Red, one exactly perfect moment after another, and Sasha and Ruby held each other as they laughed, kissed, and danced together into the night.

EPILOGUE

Epilogue – Two and a half years later

“Sash? Babe? Can you bring out an extra stack of Solo cups whenever you bring the punch?” Ruby called back over her shoulder. Her attention was otherwise focused on arranging plastic utensils, piles of napkins, and recycled paper plates on the folding table they'd set up in their backyard.

Our backyard. Straightening up, Ruby beamed as she surveyed the wide expanse of brick patio and green grass, hemmed in by a polished maple-wood fence. Winston was frolicking around in the sun as he'd done every day since they had moved into their new home, though today he was accompanied by his favorite stick-thrower, Holly Bloom. Holly's beach-blond hair flew around her shoulders as she chased Winston around, hurling sticks ahead of him for him to chase and catch. Nearby, her partner Deborah was setting up a cornhole game and watching the fun Holly and Winston were having, an indulgent smile on her face as she piled little throwable beanbags into a basket.

“Coming through!” Cam Watson emerged from the back door of the little Spanish-style house, a case of beer balanced on each shoulder. She carefully made her way down the porch steps to the patio and stopped next to Ruby. “Where to?”

“That table.” Ruby pointed to another long folding table set up along a side fence. “Sash is going to bring her special rum punch out soon, and I think Esme’s on her way with ice.”

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“Esme is here with ice.” A smiling Esme sailed through the house door and down the steps, bags of ice in hand. “Nora stopped in the kitchen to admire the work you two have done in there. She says you’ve definitely added value to the place in just a couple of months, so if you re-sell in future, you’ll be in good shape.”

“Well, we did it for us,” Ruby chuckled. “Not for some hypothetical future buyer. Not that we have any intention of selling, anyway.”

She and Sasha had closed on their first home only ten weeks ago. For ten whole weeks, they’d been homeowners. Ruby could hardly believe it.

Nora had used her connections in the world of LA real estate to set them up with what she called a “real bulldog of a realtor,” a friendly but tough as nails woman who refused to compromise on their wishlist for a perfect home. Marissa had been tireless in her pursuit, pulling them from house to house in the greater LA area.

But at last, she’d found their home, a cozy, whitewashed stucco house with lots of light and space for the two of them and Winston, tucked away in Echo Park. And now Ruby and Sasha were getting ready to host a blowout of a housewarming party for their friends and family.

Goldie Richards glided out into the backyard, a self-assured smile on her lovely face and her pinup-perfect blonde waves gently bouncing around her shoulders. She was cradling several bottles of Cristal in her arms. “Where do you want these?” she called out, pausing at the top of the steps.

“There with your gal,” Ruby replied, pointing to Cam at the drinks table. “Leave

room for a punch bowl, please. Also, I still can't believe the actual Goldie Richards is in my actual yard!"

"No problem. And get used to it, sweetheart!" Goldie flashed that Hollywood smile that stopped everyone in their tracks, men and women alike, and gracefully made her way down the steps and across the lawn, the skirt of her gauzy blue sundress wafting in the breeze. It still amazed Ruby that the willowy, award-winning actress and casual to a fault Cam had gotten together and stayed that way. But they seemed a true love match. She smiled to watch them meet up at the table, as Cam took the bottles of champagne from Goldie and lined them up on the table, then swept her gorgeous girlfriend up into a sizzling kiss. Happiness radiated from them, the way Ruby hoped it did from herself and Sasha after a year and a half.

Arms wrapped around her waist, and Ruby tilted her head to look back at her own gorgeous girlfriend. Sasha's dark eyes twinkled as she gave Ruby a squeeze. "It looks great out here, Rubes."

"Thank you, babe." Ruby surveyed their backyard—theirs! She still couldn't quite believe it—and leaned back into Sasha's embrace. "Do you need any help in the kitchen?"

"No way. I've had a real assembly line going in there all day." Sasha chuckled. "I shanghai'd Nora into stuffing deviled eggs and sprinkling them with candied maple pepper bacon, I taught Holly how to fill petit fours with Cointreau cream before she came out here to play with Win, and..." She paused. "Well, Deb has turned out to be a surprisingly well-equipped catering resource. She and Hols brought so many trays of stuffed mushrooms, potato bites, and mini quiches, plus a huge pan of baklava. They were up all night actually making it all by hand."

"We love you both, I go nowhere empty-handed, and I'm no stranger to hosting parties." Deb swept up to them from the cornhole game and bustled off into the house. She emerged within two minutes, a tray full of roast baby potatoes filled with

caviar and sour cream held securely in front of her. “Point me to a table.”

“There, next to drinks.” Ruby twisted in Sasha’s arms and leaned in for a sweet kiss.

“Where’s the rum punch?”

“Chilling in the fridge, I’ll bring it out once everyone’s here. And yes, I heard you about the cups.” Sasha leaned in for a kiss of her own, on Ruby’s forehead. “What else needs to be done?”

“Not much, just a few more decorations.” Ruby glanced behind her to take stock of who was available. “I’m gonna rope Cam into helping me put up all the twinkle lights. She’s so tall, we might not even need a ladder.”

“Hey, I heard that,” Cam said, strolling up with a pout on her face. Goldie was close behind, grinning.

“I think you were meant to, sweetheart.” With a quick hand, she slapped Cam’s blue-jeaned butt. “Lean into your blessings. We can’t all be so usefully tall. Besides, it’s hot.” Goldie stood on her toes and hooked her delicate chin over Cam’s shoulder. “Go put on a show, let me be the one to watch for once.”

“Since you asked nicely,” Cam grumbled, rubbing her poor abused butt cheek while everyone tried to stifle their giggles. “Rubes, any particular instructions for me?”

“No, just whatever looks good to you. I trust your judgment, and Goldie can guide you if you get stuck, she’s got a great eye for décor.” Ruby and Sasha had been to dinner at Goldie’s exquisitely decorated home enough times to be well acquainted with the actress’ excellent taste. Ruby left them to uncoiling the ropes of lights and walked over to the patio they’d designated for the musical line-up Mia Cortés had been kind enough to arrange for them. Ruby wished Mia and her girlfriend Harper could be here themselves, but she really couldn’t fault them for being busy. If she’d been invited to perform at Coachella, she wouldn’t turn the opportunity down either.

It was too big a deal. Still, they'd allotted time during the party later to stream Mia's set to a projector screen set up at the back fence.

"The neighbors really are okay with us throwing this huge party, right?" Sasha's voice was tight with anxiety, and when Ruby stepped back to look at her, she began to twist her fingers into knots. "I don't want to get off on the wrong foot with them."

"Babe. You hand delivered the world's greatest homemade chocolate chip cookies to half the houses on our block, and lemon custard tarts to the other. You made tomato soup with croutons for Lily Jensen next door when she got sick, and the croutons were made from your own sourdough bread! We invited the Papadakis' on the other side over for a nacho buffet two nights ago. And we invited any neighbor who wants to drop in tonight." Ruby took Sasha's hands in hers and made them go still. "There's no more wrong feet to get off on. You have bribed literally everyone into excellent food submission. It'll be fine."

"You're right, you're right, I know you are." Sasha closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. "I'm gonna go get changed, I smell like cooking."

"Some people are into that!" Ruby called after her as she retreated into the house. "Some people are me," she muttered with a chuckle.

"Kinky." Nora Hartley strolled out of the house with yet another tray of hors d'oeuvres in her hands and one elegant blonde eyebrow raised in amusement. "I've got more snacks for you."

"Over by Deb." Ruby pointed. "Plenty of space on the table, and there's those screen things you can put over everything to keep the bugs and dust off."

"Great. Oh, and there's my wife at the drinks table. Fantastic." She smiled at Ruby. "You look happy. It's nice."

“I am happy. Thanks, Nora.” She couldn’t stop the smile beaming from her face as she watched Nora make her way to the food and drink area. After the willowy blonde developer had set down her burden, she tugged her tiny wife into a heated kiss. Esme’s chestnut and silver curls spilled down the back of her flamenco-red tank dress, and she was smiling into the kiss. Ruby clasped her hands over her heart to see it.

Romance was all over her back yard, in fact. Goldie had her hands on Cam’s waist as Cam strung up the lights, and she was looking up at her with adoration in her eyes. At the food and drinks table, Deb was arranging her trays of goodies, but her gaze was glued on Holly playing with Winston, and a soft smile was playing on her lips.

Natalie had arrived, hand in hand with her new girlfriend Saoirse, and they were setting up more games and making heart eyes at each other. They’d met the previous year when Nat had gone on vacation in Ireland, Ruby’s recently published Highlander romance firmly in hand. “You’re not even going to the right country,” Ruby had protested.

“Eh, I’m also not looking for a Scotsman in a kilt. I’m going for the generalvibe,” Natalie had replied breezily.

Ten days later, she’d turned up at the Lounge with dark-haired, freckled Saoirse in tow and a goofy grin on her face. They’d been all but inseparable ever since. Saoirse had even applied to UCLA to do a Masters in Linguistics and had gotten in, so she wasn’t going back to Galway anytime soon. Natalie hadn’t stopped smiling since. If that wasn’t romance, Ruby didn’t know what was.

As a classic holiday romantic film once said, love, actually, was all around. Ruby sighed happily.

“Everything okay?” Sasha emerged from the house and took Ruby in her arms again.

Ruby leaned back and snuggled in. “Everything’s perfect,” she said, happy from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. “Absolutely perfect.”